



MARX, ENGELS, AND MARXISMS

# Marx, Spinoza and Darwin

Materialism, Subjectivity and  
Critique of Religion

Mauricio Vieira Martins

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# Marx, Engels, and Marxisms

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Mauricio Vieira Martins

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## PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITION

First published in Brazil in 2017 under the title *Marx, Espinosa e Darwin: pensadores da imanência* (*Marx, Spinoza and Darwin: thinkers of immanence*), this book has been extensively revised and updated for its English-language edition.<sup>1</sup> A general presentation of the work can be found in the Introduction, which seeks to clarify its main objectives. To summarize, I highlight three of them here. The first is to investigate the contribution of these aforementioned thinkers—with all due respect to their differences—to the category of *immanence*, particularly fruitful in each of the authors, with consequences for the understanding even of our contemporary moment. Spinoza, Marx and Darwin appear here as thinkers who were able to affirm the human world as an immanent reality, opposing various types of religious transcendence at the time of

<sup>1</sup> The book was published as volume III of the *Coleção Niep/Marx*—a series edited by the *Núcleo Interdisciplinar de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre Marx e o Marxismo* [Interdisciplinary Center for Studies and Research on Marx and Marxism] at the Universidade Federal Fluminense—of which I am a member (<https://www.niepmarx.blog.br/>). In Brazil, the publisher Editora Consequência was responsible for the first edition, which is out of print. The second Brazilian edition was published by Usina Editorial. I take this opportunity to mention that, as regards the secondary literature, quotations from books and articles not published in English have been translated for the present volume. An example of this—but not the only one—was György Lukács's extensive work entitled *The ontology of social being*, since the three volumes currently published in English correspond only to a part of that work.

their writing. A second aim of the book is to investigate the role that *human subjectivity* plays in an immanent, materialist approach, given the frequent criticisms claiming that this approach weakens the importance of subjects in mundane life. Thus, this book seeks to make transparent the relevance of *human action* in an immanent approach, thereby dispelling the misconception that, for instance, Marxism is a form of philosophical objectivism. Finally, this conceptual debate provides the conditions to examine in the last two chapters the reasons why *the expected decline of religion with the development of science did not in fact occur* (a forecast found in prominent authors of the early twentieth century, such as Sigmund Freud and Max Weber). For this, it was necessary to analyze some of the characteristics of neoliberal globalization, intensified since the final third of the twentieth century. The deterioration of living conditions for vast segments of the population, together with the predominance of a particularly intimidating reality, constitute the background that is responsible, in my understanding, for the contemporary strengthening of religious discourse. This strengthening materializes not only in the more ostensive fundamentalisms, but also runs through the ideological superstructures of various societies (with evident national differences, some of them described throughout the book).

\* \* \*

For this 2022 English-language edition of the book, nearly five years after its first release, a retrospective look shows that it is worth pointing out, albeit briefly, at least two aspects that deserve attention.

The first concerns the fact that since 2017 there has unfortunately been an increase in the deterioration of living conditions on the planet as a whole, a deterioration that preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, to be sure, but that was undoubtedly aggravated by it. Environmental devastation—identified by various researchers as a probable cause of the pandemic<sup>2</sup>—has become so evident that it now justly occupies a prominent place on any emancipatory political agenda, and particularly in the debate of the Marxist left. Regarding the theoretical debate, it must be said that there has been an increase in studies that, based on indications found in Marx's writings, construct a solid articulation between

<sup>2</sup> Rob Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of COVID* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

Marxism and the ecological cause. To the names of John Bellamy Foster, Paul Burkett and Michael Löwy—researchers of the environmental issue for many years—are added authors such as Kohei Saito, who has buried once and for all the image that Marx was blind to the environmental destruction caused by capitalist accumulation.

There is no doubt that this accumulation intensifies its voracious course, causing, in addition to environmental devastation, greater concentration of wealth and capital. In the first six months of the health crisis in 2020, the planet's billionaires became nearly 30% wealthier.<sup>3</sup> With regard to the themes examined in this book, this scenario has strengthened extremely regressive religious movements that, as I tried to demonstrate in 2017, are better understood when viewed within this context of social crisis and a narrow limitation of political projects. In Brazil, my country of origin, the growth of religious movements is such that it is expanding through the country's political and legal institutions and representatives. In 2019, President Jair Bolsonaro famously declared that he would name a “terribly evangelical” minister to the Supreme Federal Court, the highest in the country (a statement that is an affront to the secular character of the Court). In 2021, he kept his promise: the Presbyterian pastor André Mendonça became the newest Supreme Court judge. On the day he was approved by the Senate, First Lady Michelle Bolsonaro commemorated by entering into a supposed religious trance. In a farcical scene, she publicly displayed her alleged gift of glossolalia, the ability to speak the “tongue of angels.”<sup>4</sup>

Having said that, I reiterate that it is necessary to go beyond the space of religious discourse to understand the deeper causes that generate it. *And these causes can be considerably different from the perceived phenomenon.* The economist Andrew Kliman once affirmed that “What controls the world economy is not the IMF or the WB or the US Treasury or Wall Street. What controls the capitalist world economy is rather an

<sup>3</sup> Americans for tax fairness, ‘Billionaire Wealth Grew by \$845 Billion, or 29%, as America Struggled Through First Six Months of Pandemic’, 17 September 2020, <https://americansfortaxfairness.org/issue/billionaire-wealth-grew-845-billion-29-america-struggled-first-six-months-pandemic/>.

<sup>4</sup> Kiko Nogueira, ‘Glossolalia: São Paulo Dizía que Era Preciso Tradutor para quem “Fala em Línguas,” como Michelle Bolsonaro’, *Diário Do Centro do Mundo*, 4 December 2021, <https://www.diariodocentrodomundo.com.br/777300-2/>.

*impersonal law*, the *law of value*.”<sup>5</sup> A productive statement, as it directs our attention beyond visible institutions (no doubt relevant, such as the World Bank and the IMF) towards the underlying trends responsible for the development of the situation in which we live. However, a reading of recent analyses in the social sciences reveals that they are often tied to the more immediate appearance of phenomena, indeed truly dramatic. But this should not limit us to a merely photographic record of the situation, so to speak. On this unilateral attachment to the appearance of phenomena, the contribution of classic thinkers remains precious. In an extremely suggestive passage of his *Ethics* that refers to the active role of human thought, Spinoza warns:

that our thought does not fall into pictures. For by ideas I understand, not the images that are formed at the back of the eye (and, if you like, in the middle of the brain), but concepts of Thought<sup>6</sup>

It is precisely these concepts of thought—categories, if we prefer the Marxian formulation—that I am interested in developing here, especially when it is known that they have a close relationship with reality itself (unlike what Kantianism supposed). Instead of paintings, understood by Spinoza as the sensorial register of a given reality, it is necessary to encourage the activity of thought that manages to *surpass the immediate appearance towards its most internal structures*. In the present case, capitalist accumulation under the imperatives of self-expanding value shows its deadliest face, promoting greater concentration of capital and more devastation of nature: emancipatory struggles must be waged against this logic. Simply claiming greater access to secular education—a classic demand of

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Kliman, ‘The Crisis, the Debt and the Law of Value’, *The Hobgoblin* 3 (Winter 2000/2001), [http://www.thehobgoblin.co.uk/journal/h32002\\_AK\\_Debt.htm](http://www.thehobgoblin.co.uk/journal/h32002_AK_Debt.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Baruch Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), II, P. 48, Sch., 484. References to Spinoza’s *Ethics* follow the standard pattern of citations to that text in specialized literature. The Part number is indicated by a Roman numeral. The other conventions are: A = Axiom; P = Proposition; D = Definition; C = Corollary; Sch = Scholium; L = Lemma; Post = Postulate. Thus, *Ethics*, II, P. 48, Sch, means: *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 48, Scholium. Throughout this book, quotations of Spinoza’s writings have been drawn from the translations of Samuel Shirley in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002) and Edwin Curley in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).



some progressive sectors in response to religious fundamentalisms—is an insufficient proposal given the magnitude of what is at stake here.

\* \* \*

The second question to be updated in this Preface is more theoretical; it concerns a question posed to me by some colleagues about the fact that I have not included G. W. F. Hegel as a thinker of immanence. In the Excursus found at the end of the second chapter, there are some reasons for this; but I can provide some supplementary indications here.

It is undeniable that Hegel, distancing himself from the naïve theodicies of his time, contributed with considerable advances to the internal development of the categories he investigated. In the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*—one example among many—we read that it is the task of this knowledge to “look on at the proper immanent development of the thing itself.”<sup>7</sup> The task of the work was to investigate the knowledge in focus—the Philosophy of Right—on its own terms, instead of imposing an external parameter of analysis.<sup>8</sup>

However, an examination of the more general framework of Hegelianism reveals that the philosopher was still committed to a particular creationist doctrine. Hegel had no problems in admitting this, making an explicit defense of Christian metaphysics, which affirms the creation of the world from nothing. This is what his *Science of Logic* tells us in very direct terms:

...logic is to be understood as the system of pure reason, as the realm of pure thought. *This realm is truth unveiled, truth as it is in and for itself.* It can therefore be said that this content is *the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit.*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.

<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, it must be noted that Marx rejected in this Hegelian text the fact that “the logic of the matter” was subordinated to “the matter of logic,” which would indicate a failure by Hegel with regard to his intention announced in the book’s Introduction. Cf. Karl Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law’, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works* (hereafter referred to as *MECW*), vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 18.

<sup>9</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29.

For a twenty-first-century reader, this very open defense of a doctrine of creation may come as a surprise, as conceptions that pointed to a different mode of investigation were already circulating in Hegel's time. Spinoza's affirmation of an *uncreated* substance was precisely one of them. But this surprise diminishes when one considers that Hegel's thought was rooted, as he himself acknowledged, in the Lutheranism of his early years as a seminarian. Thus, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, he states with conviction: "This comprehension has been called Faith, but it is not an historical faith; we Lutherans—I am a Lutheran and will remain the same—have only this original faith."<sup>10</sup>

This proud assumption of Lutheranism is also what explains the need for *religious cult* Hegel considered to be indispensable to the full exercise of faith.<sup>11</sup> Once again, the difference with Spinoza is almost palpable. Indeed, the Spinozan God is a non-anthropomorphic *cause of itself*—this is what shocked his contemporaries—completely alien to the forms of religious cult offered to him. Incidentally, we recall that Marx himself pointed firmly to the mystical character of the Hegelian dialectic, which did not prevent him from productively absorbing its rational core (as can be read in the Posface to the second edition of *Capital*).<sup>12</sup>

Having clarified the criteria that define the choice of the thinkers analyzed in this book—a choice that gave priority to those committed to a strong immanentism—it is necessary to add the following. Hegel's limits on the subject in focus here do not lead me to adopt a hostile posture toward this great thinker. This posture is frequent among some contemporary Spinoza experts, such as Antonio Negri, who refers to Hegel as "that great functionary of the bourgeoisie," who had ceded "to the sordid game of mediation."<sup>13</sup> Unlike Negri, I understand that Hegel's

<sup>10</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1: Greek Philosophy to Plato* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 73.

<sup>11</sup> In the words of Charles Taylor: "This is why Hegel defends [...] the Lutheran view of the Eucharist not only against the Catholic interpretation but also against the conception of the Reformed Church." Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 489.

<sup>12</sup> "[The Hegelian dialectic] must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell." Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1982), Posface to the second edition, 103.

<sup>13</sup> Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 140–41.

contribution was and remains fundamental not only to Marxism, but to philosophy in general. Thus, if the topic chosen here for discussion were, just as a hypothesis, the importance of *contradictions* in the historical process, the name of Hegel would certainly appear with the prominence that is his due. Well known is his seminal effort to disclose—against the philosophies of identity—internal contradiction as the unavoidable driving force of historical processes.<sup>14</sup> This fact also allows us to emphasize, now moving beyond Hegel, that the effects of organized human action on certain contradictions can function as a solvent that corrodes even apparently impregnable structures. Here, philosophy is intertwined with political action.

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<sup>14</sup> For readers interested on the importance of Hegel for Marxian thinking, I address this in greater detail in my essay, 'Hegel, Espinosa e o Marxismo: Para Além de Dicotomias', *Revista Novos Rumos* 57, no. 1 (2020): 29–46.

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## PRAISE FOR MARX, SPINOZA AND DARWIN

“All of a sudden, while reading about Spinoza and Marx, the reader is surprised by passages on fiscal adjustments, precarious labor and Japanese robots; or while reading about Darwin and religious thought, is surprised by passages on the social stigmas of HIV/AIDS and Pope Benedict XVI’s declarations—all of it contextualized. As the reading progresses, recognition grows stronger: a patient and firm construction of a powerful project of science affirmation and political transformation on solid philosophical grounds.”

—João Abreu, *PhD in Theory of Law at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and author of* The problem of private property in Spinoza

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PART I

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Spinoza and Marx



## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

It is not immediately clear why immanence is so dangerous, but it is. It engulfs sages and gods. The part of immanence, or the part of fire, that is how the philosopher is recognized.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari<sup>1</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari's words sound especially current in light of the exponential growth of religious movements across the globe that appeal to transcendent causes as a guarantee of the veracity of their claims. While the phenomenon's more explicit dimension is expressed in the proliferation of various types of fundamentalisms, the religious return is also making its presence felt in more learned segments of the population. Intellectuals with sophisticated theoretical backgrounds publicly announce the need for a return to older religious traditions. Within the scope of Marxist debate, we find the example of Slavoj Žižek proposing to redeem the truth of Christianity: "yes, there is a direct lineage from Christianity to Marxism; yes, Christianity and Marxism should fight on the same side of the barricade against the onslaught of new spiritualisms."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 45 (translation revised according to the French original: "La part de l'immanence, ou la part du feu, c'est à cela qu'on reconnaît le philosophe").

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 2.

The repeated insistence of the religious demand raises a set of questions that, in addition to having practical consequences, also require conceptual clarification. Is the often proposed alliance between religion, science and philosophy sustainable as a path toward a more comprehensive and reputedly holistic knowledge? Is it correct to say, as does the physicist Dr. Amit Goswami, that the discoveries of quantum physics confirm the teachings of ancient religious traditions? And that, furthermore, the so-called materialist position in philosophy is showing its irremediable obsolescence and decadence?<sup>3</sup>

As is already apparent in the proposal defended here, this book points in a quite different direction. The writings of Spinoza, Marx and Darwin are examined here to reveal how they formulate—certainly with substantive differences between them—the thematic field in focus.<sup>4</sup> What we find in these thinkers are approaches to mundane phenomena that seek to insert them into a *plane of immanence*—a category that will be progressively elucidated—that does not invoke an external guarantee for the validity of its affirmations. Attesting to the crucial nature of what is at stake here, it is necessary to clarify from the outset that a desire—in spite of themselves—to inaugurate a new religion has been attributed to each one of the aforementioned thinkers. The Romantic philosopher Novalis thus referred to Spinoza as “a man drunk with God,” given the recurrence in his writings of signifiers for God. However, a more careful investigation of Spinoza’s work makes it clear that the God to which the Dutch thinker refers is in fact a non-anthropomorphic *cause of itself*, which in no way resembles the God of Judeo-Christian theology.

There are many who see in Marx’s project to establish a socialist society an echo of the ancient promise of an advent of the kingdom of heaven on earth, as can be read in Raymond Aron’s writing about Marxism (one of the most cartoonish examples of attributing a religious meaning to

<sup>3</sup> Amit Goswami, *The Self-Aware Universe: How Consciousness Creates the Material World* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1993), 24–47.

<sup>4</sup> I decided to maintain certain thematic recurrences throughout the book—and even explicit repetitions—in the hope that readers who decide to begin their reading with a more advanced chapter will still be able to extract sufficient meaning from the book. At times, I chose to use a more accessible language to broaden the reading public. This occurred more visibly—but not exclusively—in the chapters dedicated to Darwin, in view of a lesser familiarity with the naturalist’s work among readers in the human sciences.

Marxism<sup>5</sup>). In this reading, Marx's extensive critique of political economy is completely lost, transformed into a mere footnote to a supposedly eschatological project. As for Darwin, Dominic Erdozain in his book *The Soul of Doubt* presents the naturalist as someone immersed in a religious worldview: "he [Darwin] managed to present evolution as a true and dignified doctrine of creation."<sup>6</sup> However, it is noteworthy that Erdozain does not undertake a textual analysis of the content of Darwin's theoretical work, which points toward a very different understanding of the matter.

I have sought to reveal throughout this investigation that the attempts to assimilate these thinkers to their object of criticism (religious thinking) forfeit precisely what is most unique about what they have to offer: the effort to plunge into the mundane logic in which we live. This contrast to the dominant religious discourses of their time is explicitly declared by each of the three authors. It is not by chance that Spinoza, Marx and Darwin were fiercely attacked during their lives—a hostility that continues unabated today.

*Immanent causality*, like any complex concept, cannot be summarily defined: it can only be elucidated along the way, through various resonances that are explored throughout the book. If, at first, this causality is opposed to the notion of transcendence (which finds its guardian in a God, seen as creator of the universe and human beings), it should also be distinguished from *transitive causality*, where the effect is detached from the cause that produced it and constitutes itself as a separate reality.

This distinction is announced quite early in Spinoza's trajectory. In his staging of a dialogue between Reason and Lust in a text from his youth—the *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*—the philosopher takes the side of Reason,<sup>7</sup> disapproving of Lust for not knowing the immanent cause, wherein the effects cannot be separated from the cause that produces them. We will see that this principle of causality is correlated with the affirmation of a totality that cannot be arbitrarily divided,

<sup>5</sup> "To all intents and purposes, this philosophy [Marxism] subsumes the prophetism." Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1962), 56.

<sup>6</sup> Dominic Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt: The Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 179.

<sup>7</sup> Baruch Spinoza, 'Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being', in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 75–76.

holding in itself the categories that allow its comprehension, difficult as may be a first approximation to Spinoza's *causa sui* (*cause of itself*, or *self-caused*).

Meanwhile in Marx, the immanent view of the real also manifests itself precociously. In a letter he wrote to his father in 1837, when he was only 19 years old—and certainly quite far from the conception that later received the name of Marxism—Marx announces a firm distance from Hegel when he writes “I arrived at the point of seeking the idea in reality itself. If previously the gods had dwelt above the earth, now they became its centre.”<sup>8</sup> The Hegelian idea, which Marx called a sophisticated philosophical translation of a theology, did not provide him an adequate foundation to address the contradictions of a capitalist society. In addition to the divergence from Hegel, as early as 1843 we also find an explicit programmatic statement: “criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism.”<sup>9</sup>

As for Darwin, it is enough to recall that he withheld publication of *On the Origin of Species* for several years because he correctly anticipated the enormous resistance that the text would encounter. A recurring motif in his work is the statement that when we do not know the real causes operating in a reality, it's easy to appeal to religious categories such as *the creation plan*: “It is so easy to hide our ignorance under such expressions as the ‘plan of creation’, ‘unity of design’, etc., and to think that we give an explanation when we only restate a fact.”<sup>10</sup> Today, more than 150 years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, research in the life sciences has reiterated the fundamental fragility of creationist belief, to the same extent that it has accumulated countless corroborations of Darwin's theses.

\* \* \*

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Letter from Marx to his Father, in Trier, November 10, 1837’, in *MECW*, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law’, in *MECW*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 175.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 354.

This book addresses more than the debate about an immanent perspective: without the intention of being exhaustive, it is worth mentioning some other issues examined here.

The first of these is related to a return to the basic category of *substance*, declared obsolete by vast sectors of twentieth-century and twenty-first-century philosophy. It is true that, in its scholastic version, a substantialist approach should in fact be rejected, and for various reasons, prominent among which is its static quality, which fails to grasp the continuous becoming of the real. There are, however, more refined formulations of the category that are indispensable for breaking away from an apprehension of the world that is content only with its most visible appearance. Of the three thinkers examined here, perhaps Spinoza—expelled from the Amsterdam Synagogue—is the most resolute advocate of the need to think of ourselves as finite modifications of an infinite substance. This affirmation of an uncreated substance (Spinoza’s divergence from the creationist doctrines of his time) generated fruitful developments in later centuries, beyond his own position. To summarize an extensive debate, I agree with those who call attention to the category of *emergence*. This category indicates the progressive organization and stratification of substance (which should not be considered only as matter, because it involves thought as well as abstract relations) at increasingly complex levels, demanding a finer categorial network, so to speak, in order to be properly understood.

The debate that took place between biologists and physicists throughout the twentieth century might be considered paradigmatic. Biologists sought to show that the physicalist project cherished by some scientists—who sought to interpret the phenomenon of life in only physical terms—disregarded the complexity specific to the emergence and rise of life in the world.<sup>11</sup> But this emergence did not occur in a vacuum: it is viscerally linked to a historical process. If in sciences such as astronomy and physics the temporal path can be placed between parentheses within certain limits to better visualize certain parameters, in the field of life sciences the temporal transformation of reality is so decisive that those who do not recognize it will incur gross errors. Gerald Edelman, 1972

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Jay Gould warns of the flagrantly reductionist character of this project; Cf. Stephen Jay Gould, “‘What Is Life?’ as a Problem in History”, in *What Is Life? The Next Fifty Years: Speculations on the Future of Biology*, ed. Michael Murphy and Luke O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).



Nobel laureate in physiology and medicine, is correct in asserting the insufficiency of the principle of symmetry—characteristic of the *physical sciences*—to explain the emergence of the phenomena of life. The latter “[...] is a local saga so far told only on Earth: It is historical, it occurs in a very narrow temperature range, it is extraordinarily complex and specific to particular structures [...].”<sup>12</sup>

There is no doubt that Darwin’s contribution is essential for those who are dedicated to the research of long-term historical processes. While social Darwinism (which uncritically transposes the categories of biology to the field of social relations) should be the object of constant criticism, the deeper meaning of Darwin’s contribution is quite distinct from this. The English naturalist shows us that, far from being a crystalized structure, the form of nature and living beings as we know them are the result of a very long process of transformations. Darwin gave a history to the natural world: instead of conceiving it as an already constituted system of stable relations (as did the “fixists” of his time), he demonstrated that even species with a long history must be seen as part of the process that generated them.

Nevertheless, a basic caveat must be made. It is well known that the causal mechanism Darwin revealed was that of natural selection: the production of variability over generations of different species and selection of those individuals that have a greater chance of survival. This mechanism is specific to living species; it is simply not found in physics (hence the fair protest of biologists in response to attempts by physicists to uncritically assimilate their science). Moreover, it is not viable to transpose the mechanism of natural selection to explain the complexity of human societies. Darwin himself warned that the causal principle he revealed is insufficient for the correct representation of human societies. In his book *The Descent of Man*, considered to be more anthropological, he states explicitly that “For the moral qualities are advanced, either directly or indirectly, much

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Edelman, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 1992), 207. A reading of Edelman’s deservedly famous book shows that though the history of life is, in his words, a *local saga* (in contrast to the more general principles of physics), it still involves historical categories and regularities that can be known.

more through the effects of habit, the reasoning powers, instruction, religion, &c., than through natural selection [...].”<sup>13</sup>

In this regard, it is curious to find biologists—who rightly protest the extrapolation of the categories of physics to biology—fall into the analogous error of supposing that social relations can be derived from the processes of natural selection. This is the case of ethologist and biologist Richard Dawkins, who expressed gross reductionism in a commentary about the diversity of religions: “Two different religions might be seen as two alternative memplexes. Perhaps Islam is analogous to a carnivorous gene complex, Buddhism to a herbivorous one.”<sup>14</sup> Here, a vast set of economic, social and cultural causes of the different religions is minimized and reduced to a supposed genetic determinism (of “carnivores” or “herbivores”). We thus see that, in both the physicalism and biologization of social relations, the emergence of new categorical relations from a progressively modified foundation vanishes entirely.

The rise of the human social world as well, which inflects and modifies its most archaic natural foundation, requires an apprehension that takes these changes into account. It is impossible not to recall the words of Marx in this regard: “Hunger is hunger; but hunger that is satisfied by cooked meat eaten with knife and fork differs from hunger that devours raw meat with the help of hands, nails and teeth.”<sup>15</sup> This is a synthesis, no doubt, but with the merit of exemplifying the insuppressible character of biological determination, hunger, and its progressive transformation through increasingly social mediations to satisfy it.

Thus, the progressive emergence of a specifically human world brings with it a logic that can no longer be reduced to that of natural selection (an obvious observation for any researcher with a Marxist background). Our next step will be to inquire about the precise status of the intervention of human *subjects* in this world. In the history of thought, there are those who understand that an immanent perspective annuls the role of

<sup>13</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 404. In the contemporary Darwinian debate, science historian Patrick Tort emphasizes with great insistence Darwin’s difference with the “the naive continuism of sociobiology.” Patrick Tort, *Darwin e a Ciência da Evolução* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2004), 110.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 200.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’ (*Grundrisse*), in *MECW*, vol. 28 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 29.

subjectivity, a criticism frequently addressed to both Spinoza and Marx. It would be as if human action were engulfed by a “maddening and depersonalizing immersion in Being.”<sup>16</sup> However, unlike this perspective, I maintain that affirming the primacy of objectivity—that set of already formed conditions which in fact precedes the entrance of each one of us into mundane life—is not at all related to a denial of the active human presence. For this reason, for those who question whether Marxism is a type of philosophical objectivism, the best response is an emphatic “no.” This book therefore includes some texts that endeavor to clarify the particular space reserved for subjectivity in Marx. He sometimes formulated human labor itself—a distinctive mark of our species, together with language—as *subjective activity*,<sup>17</sup> in the precise sense that it comes from subjects externalizing themselves on an increasingly broad scale and ramified throughout the real world.

Not only during the hominization process but also in today’s daily life, labor continues to perform a fundamental role; the theses of an imminent end of the labor society are fragile and do not stand up to reality. The growing precariousness of the working classes—an undeniable phenomenon—did not lead to a decline of the importance of labor to the functioning of capitalist society: it is enough to recall the material and symbolic violence with which various State apparatuses react to the simple possibility of a strike. That said, it is necessary to add that the complexity of current society cannot be explained only through the genesis of labor. Marx detected in the nineteenth century already the formation of a progressively more complex system, one that subordinated the genesis of labor and began to function based on a peculiar automatism. In his words, “In order to develop the concept of capital, we must begin not with labour but with value, or more precisely, with the exchange value already developed in the movement of circulation.”<sup>18</sup>

When contemporary value chains are analyzed, what is seen is a relationship of brutal alienation between producers and the estranged entity generated by human action, “the market,” a euphemism for *capital*,

<sup>16</sup> Željko Loparić, *Heidegger Réu – Um Ensaio Sobre a Periculosidade da Filosofia* (Campinas: Papirus, 1990), 213.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’, 413.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 190. On the topic of value as an *automatic subject*, see also: Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1982), 255.

which subordinates human beings. This subordination has been accompanied by a recurrent deterioration of the living conditions of most of the world's population. It is not necessary to adopt a Marxist perspective to recognize this: in a speech from 2020, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres stated that “inequality, an issue which ‘defines our time’, risks destroying the world’s economies and societies.”<sup>19</sup> More recently, in early 2022, Oxfam (the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief), a non-governmental organization based in Oxford, England, also released its report on global wealth concentration. Among other data, the report examines the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on a world that has long been fragmented by inequality, stating that “Inequality of income is a stronger indicator of whether you will die from COVID-19 than age.” The report also recalls something that is not new to those who study rural and urban expropriations and wealth concentration: “Widening economic, gender, and racial inequalities – as well as the inequality that exists between countries – are tearing our world apart.”<sup>20</sup>

It is striking that in our historic moment many seem to accept with greater ease the possibility of the physical disappearance of the human species than the possibility of an emancipatory political project. If we combine the concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny segment of the population with its counterpart of violence and degradation of the social fabric correlated with it, the consequence is the increasing difficulty of producing a meaning for human existence.

Throughout the world, different religious movements proliferate in the space of this void of meaning. Many of these movements—in alliance with various conservative sectors—are constantly engaged in an ongoing attack on both Marxism and Darwinism. The creationist doctrine consequently gains strength, whether in its more literal version or in the supposed scientific version of a creationism that does not dare say its name, referred to as intelligent design. If the geographic home of intelligent design is found

<sup>19</sup> United Nations, “‘Inequality Defines Our Time’: UN Chief Delivers Hard-Hitting Mandela Day Message”, 18 July 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1068611>.

<sup>20</sup> Oxfam, ‘Inequality Kills: The Unparalleled Action Needed to Combat Unprecedented Inequality in the Wake of COVID-19’, 17 January 2022, <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621341/bp-inequality-kills-170122-en.pdf;jsessionid=EB1ECD3096EEAB39B71BE9ACA05A6415?sequence=9>.

in the United States, it has now spread internationally, finding followers in Brazil and Latin America.<sup>21</sup>

This book concludes with chapters that discuss the characteristics of this religious revival, a powerful manifestation since the final third of the twentieth century. To understand the phenomenon, I argue, it is necessary to go beyond the realm of strictly religious discourse and consider current social characteristics. This reveals with greater clarity an intensification of the aforementioned contradictions of our time: the barbarism coexisting with resources and wealth increasingly controlled by the few. The sharpening of these contradictions is allied to a profound crisis of political projects, in the broadest sense of the term, as projects of transformation in the way men and women organize life in society. Despite undeniable achievements in the social field, the socialist experiences of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries did not reach their goal of representing long-term alternatives to capitalist sociability. To analyze the reasons for this difficulty would take us too far from our topic.<sup>22</sup> But it is important to underscore the considerable narrowing of perspectives on human emancipation and how this contributes to the formation of a present that seems to be eternal. In subjective terms, this narrowing contributed to what Christopher Lasch in the 1980s called *the minimal self*.<sup>23</sup> This expression designates individuality that relinquishes an expansive way of life, no longer approaching existence affirmatively, but instead withdraws into a defensive core in the face of a very violent reality. Its highest value comes to be “survivalism,” in Lasch’s words, a posture that assumes pure and simple survival as the maximum reference for life, ignoring any more substantive quality in what survives. Instead of the heroic style that characterized previous historical moments (portrayed even in literature in characters that had the expectation of “a world to win”), from the last decades of the twentieth century we see the advent

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ronald Numbers, ‘Creationism Goes Global’, in *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*, Expanded edition (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Obviously, the crisis was not limited to the so-called real socialism. The intensity of the capitalist crisis is startling, even in developed nations. But the capitalist crisis is usually treated in mainstream media as a kind of force majeure (in sharp contrast to the strong criticism adopted when addressing the difficulties of the socialist bloc).

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 60–99.

of a predominantly withdrawn and frightened subjectivity, which seeks to protect itself at all times from that which threatens it, real or imaginary. In this context, discussed in greater detail in the final two chapters of the book, the weakening of a transformative societal project opens space for the expansion of transcendent religious discourse, which promises its followers what they are blatantly missing in the present: a life that can be affirmed as a project of desire.

In this sense, to criticize the assumptions and misleading consequences of religious discourse is also a way of relaunching a political project immanent to human action. The best authors of the socialist tradition show us—as much as this may surprise those who operate with a Cartesian logic—that emancipatory and revolutionary tendencies are created from the bowels of capitalist society. Therefore, long live all those experiences that point to a non-commodified life, experiences born from within capitalist alienation to which they oppose: the associated labor in its most democratic form; cooperatives that struggle to maintain integrity and autonomy; the various attempts to break with the social division of labor; gender emancipation movements and all the oppressed minorities (and majorities); the affirmation of human diversity beyond the logic of capital. More than ever before, we know today that the struggle for a qualitatively different world is a long and arduous path. It is necessary along the way to distinguish what is only of the imaginary order—projections of human desires lacking a counterpart in the real—from what can effectively already be discerned as an operating tendency in the world.

Long ago and certainly in a different context, Spinoza detected the mistake of believing that all our desires actually exist in the world. His correspondent Hugo Boxel asked his opinion about spirits; Boxel stated that they exist and contribute “to the beauty and perfection of the universe.” Rejecting this, Spinoza responded dryly that one should not suppose that the world is “adorned and furnished,” “with things which anyone can easily imagine and dream.”<sup>24</sup> Applying this brilliant teaching to our world today, we would say that the discontinuity and heterogeneity of the *imaginary* in the face of the *real* is a hard lesson to be assimilated daily by socialists of all kinds. Such is the necessary condition for

<sup>24</sup> Baruch Spinoza, ‘Letter 54, Spinoza to Boxel [September 1674]’, in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 895–99.

their political project to arise and gain strength from within the capitalist society they oppose.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# Spinoza and Marx: Thinkers of Immanence

In a posthumously published text known as the *Short Treatise*, Baruch Spinoza created a dialogue between imaginary characters, including Reason and Lust. The enactment of the supposed dialogue—a seventeenth-century rhetorical recourse—allowed the philosopher, who took the side of Reason, to defend his position:

*Reason:* You say, then, that since the cause is a producer of its effects, it must be outside them. You say this because you know only of the transitive and not of the immanent cause, which does not in any way produce something outside itself.<sup>1</sup>

The *immanent cause* is the one that Spinoza is interested in researching. For those who are not familiar with these terms, it should be clarified that, in the other conception of causality (said to be *transitive*), effects are separated from the cause that produces them, constituting an autonomous external reality. Although Lust is not aware of this, the oldest example of this exteriority might be the theory of divine creation, which declared God as a cause external to the beings he created.

On the other hand, the immanent cause is characterized by generating a peculiar internal relationship between the causing principle—which

<sup>1</sup> Baruch Spinoza, 'Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being', in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 76.

Spinoza characterizes as an infinite substance—and the effects generated by it. According to the philosopher, we are immersed in an immanent cosmos and, strictly speaking, there is no place beyond it. In contrast, Plato had named this supposed external viewpoint toward the real as the “intelligible place” (*topos noetos*), which simply does not exist in Spinoza’s philosophy. Even if his polemic was fundamentally with the metaphysical and religious thinking of the seventeenth century, the defense of immanence would generate consequences that went far beyond the debate with religious doctrines. More generally, Spinoza’s worldview is deeply marked by this affirmation of an immanent causality, which has repercussions also on the understanding of the different political regimes that were the object of his analysis.

There were fruitful developments of this conception after Spinoza. In this chapter, I seek an approximation between his position and that developed nearly two centuries later by Marx in his approach to the internal logic of capitalist society. Doubtless there are considerable differences between the two thinkers, even due to changes in the historical context. But my intention is to underscore a certain way of approaching reality that differs from a long philosophical tradition that duplicates the real world in another one that transcends it, providing a supposed measurement standard for visualizing the former. Perhaps for this reason, both Spinoza and Marx entered a collision course with the predominant transcendent view of the real; this explains the virulent resistance their ideas faced, a resistance that, far from diminishing over time, is still strong even in our twenty-first century.

## SPINOZA: FOR ANOTHER CONCEPTION OF SUBSTANCE

Important modifications took place from the dialogue of the *Short Treatise* quoted above to the *Ethics* of the mature philosopher (published in 1677), but the affirmation of an immanent causality would remain fundamental. According to Spinoza, this causality expresses the activity of an infinite substance that uninterruptedly generates effects on itself. Spinoza designates this substance—and this will certainly merit comment<sup>2</sup>—with

<sup>2</sup> Every text is directed to a certain public: this chapter is not aimed only at Spinoza’s readers, but also to that public more focused on Marx’s thinking (which is not familiar with the Dutch philosopher). For this reason, it was necessary to reconstitute here certain steps already known by the readers of Spinoza.

the name of God: “By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes”.<sup>3</sup>

For contemporary readers unfamiliar with Spinoza, it may be disconcerting to find that the word *God* invades his writings from his youth to maturity. If this is so, we may ask, how is it possible to speak of immanence if it is God, after all, who guarantees the success of the proposal of a human ethics? How to speak of immanence if even the immanent cause is presented in association with God? “God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things.”<sup>4</sup>

To respond to this question, it is important to clarify from the outset that *God* in Spinoza should be understood in a radically distinct way from that found in a long philosophical tradition. The Spinozan God is a substance, *cause of itself*, constitutive of reality, which does not have human characteristics. Spinoza’s formulation is famous: *Deus sive Natura* (God or Nature), indicating the redirecting of the cause of itself to its earthly dimension. Even spatial coordinates—basic to the definition of any being—are manifestly unsuitable for grasping this God who “is everywhere” and “does not have a right hand or a left hand, that he neither moves nor is at rest, nor is he in any particular place, but is absolutely infinite, [...]”.<sup>5</sup>

Spinoza maintains that the substance, God, has infinite attributes, of which we know only two, extension and thought. From a materialist perspective, it would be tempting to claim that in relation to extension, Spinoza’s substance could be similar to matter. But there is an important caveat: the attribute extension does not completely account for substance because the latter also involves *thought*, another attribute of it. Thus, although establishing a synonymy between substance and matter may appear tempting from our twenty-first-century perspective, strictly speaking this synonymy is incorrect, considering Spinoza’s strong emphasis on thought, understood as a constitutive part of reality, which allows for its understanding. Spinoza also recognizes the existence of other substantial attributes but clarifies that the human mind is limited

<sup>3</sup> Baruch Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), I, D. 6, 409.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., I, P. 18, 428.

<sup>5</sup> Baruch Spinoza, ‘Theological-Political Treatise’, in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 453.

(as it is the idea of a body) to adequately knowing only thought and extension.<sup>6</sup>

The shock that such a conception generated is well known in the history of philosophy: perceiving the subversiveness of his claims, Spinoza's contemporaries reacted with horror to this God that goes against common sense in every way. Perhaps the document that best attests to this repulsion is that produced by Pierre Bayle, in the entry for "Spinoza" in his *An Historical and Critical Dictionary* (published in 1697):

But that there should be wars and battles when men are only the modifications of the same being, when, consequently, only God acts, and when the God who modifies himself into a Turk is the same God in number as the God who modifies himself into a Hungarian; this is what surpasses all the monstrosities and chimerical disorders of the craziest people who were ever put away in lunatic asylums.<sup>7</sup>

We could suppose that Bayle's example—which equates Spinoza's formulation to the delirium of a lunatic in an insane asylum—is extreme because he was manifestly hostile to the philosopher's thought. But misunderstandings about the latter occurred even among those who had a real interest in Spinoza's thought. This was the case with Hugo Boxel who, in a letter of 1674, suggested that he was "depicting and representing" "a monster."<sup>8</sup>

To affirm a plane of immanence was thus seen as a monstrosity that goes against rational conception and even the possibility of an ethics. For these reasons, it is important to clarify that the God that Spinoza refers to is not at all similar to what common language understands as God. Further on, I introduce some pronouncements of contemporary thinkers who endorsed this conception of substance. Before that, however, it must be said that it was not only seventeenth-century authors who had difficulties correctly grasping Spinoza's philosophy. If we go forward to the

<sup>6</sup> Baruch Spinoza, 'Letter 64, Spinoza to Schuller [29 July 1675]', in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 918–19.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965), 311.

<sup>8</sup> Baruch Spinoza, 'Letter 55, Boxel to Spinoza [September 1674]', in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 901.

first third of the nineteenth century, we find in Hegel an accusation aimed at Spinoza that stuck for many years. For in addition to being a thinker, Hegel was an erudite connoisseur of the *history* of philosophy. For this reason, Hegel recognized Spinoza's greatness, but affirmed that "the rigidity of substance lacks the turning back into itself."<sup>9</sup> This evaluation would indicate an inability of the Spinozan substance to conduct a *reflection* in order to finally become a subject, which is the great Hegelian project.

A textual examination of Spinoza reveals, however, that this criticism is not valid. Substance is active, permanently modifying itself, generating *modes*, modifications of the infinite substance (including human beings). This is how to understand the reference to *essentia actuosa*<sup>10</sup> (active essence) of the substance: "so it is as impossible for us to conceive that God does not act as it is to conceive that he does not exist."<sup>11</sup> This means that, in its uninterrupted activity, the *causa sui* generates effects that cannot be separated from it; they belong to it and are constituted by it. We humans are a finite part of the infinite substance.

If Spinoza's God in no way resembles the God of the theologians and popular understanding, we see that the *very notion of substance has also been profoundly modified*. While in Aristotle each being has its own substance, distinct from that of other beings (e.g., the substance of wood is qualitatively different from that of marble), Spinoza expands the affirmation of substance as a constitutive principle of reality. Instead of the plurality of substances sustained by the previous philosophical tradition, we now have a single infinite substance, in which the modes are rooted, particular beings, not only humans, but all singular things.<sup>12</sup> This expansion of substantial causality is one of Spinoza's most striking philosophical gestures: it allows joining a plurality of entities that until then could only

<sup>9</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 283.

<sup>10</sup> Spinoza, 'Ethics', 1985, II, P. 3, Sch., 449.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., II, P. 3, Sch., 449.

<sup>12</sup> Spinoza also claims that there are *infinite modes* (immediate or mediate). His example of an immediate infinite mode of extension is "motion and rest." Spinoza, 'Letter 64, Spinoza to Schuller [29 July 1675]', 919.

be seen as a related group if subordinated to a transcendent perspective, which is precisely what Spinoza refused.<sup>13</sup>

To be, at the same time, part and modification of an indivisible substance—and not realize this—is the condition in which our lives take place. If the recurring motif of Heidegger’s philosophy was the “forgetfulness of being,” we could paraphrase this and mention a forgetfulness of substance on the part of philosophy and contemporary science. Highly focused on the *modes* (modifications of substance, entities), both recent philosophy and science wind up scarcely meditating on their substantial belonging, declaring this concern to be dated metaphysics.

I will make a brief parenthesis to mention that there are prominent exceptions in this scenario. Perhaps the most celebrated is that of Einstein, who on more than one occasion clearly expressed his affinity with Spinoza’s thought.<sup>14</sup> In the twenty-first century, we have the example of the biologist Lynn Margulis, who in 2008 won the Darwin-Wallace medal (at the time awarded only once every 50 years). In her book *What is life?*, co-authored with Dorion Sagan, referring to the initial formation of the first living cells that differentiated themselves from their original environment, we read:

imperiled by its own profligacy and by the *insensitivity of the substance from which it seceded* – yet upon which it absolutely depended for sustenance – life was left to its own devices.<sup>15</sup>

Margulis offers a vivid portrait of the simultaneous unity and differentiation of vital processes in the face of the inorganic substance from which they originate and enrich. These examples are enough to show that when the logical positivism of the first third of the twentieth century declared outdated the categories produced by the previous philosophical tradition (summarily named as metaphysical), it provided a classic example of the proverb that warns not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. If we ask what are today the long-lasting influences of a Moritz Schlick

<sup>13</sup> In the words of G. Deleuze: “All the formally distinct attributes are conducted by understanding to a substance that is ontologically one.” Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza et le Problème de l’expression* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1968), 56.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1960).

<sup>15</sup> Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What Is Life?* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 58, my emphasis.

(a prominent voice of the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle), the examples would be limited. But interest in the philosophy of Spinoza is growing and branches out through various fields of knowledge in the twenty-first century. In the neurosciences, Antonio Damasio—who had been so critical of Descartes—published an entire book in 2003 in praise of Spinoza.<sup>16</sup>

Having made this parenthesis about Spinoza's current relevance, it must now be said that he shows us that humans, unaware of their immersion in the activity of substance that constitutes them, come to suppose that the world exists because of them. The Appendix to Book 1 of the *Ethics* is perhaps the clearest text on this mistaken supposition. Spinoza captures here a fundamental human prejudice: *to attribute finalities to everything that is found in nature*, as if things exist to serve humans. It is just one step from there to imagine that natural processes were created by a deity:

All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end, [...] they had to infer that there was a ruler, or a number of rulers of nature, endowed with human freedom, who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use.<sup>17</sup>

Here is the origin of the anthropomorphic image of a God. An image, an expanded projection of the human replaces lack of knowledge of the real causes operating in the world: the “ruler of nature.”

<sup>16</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* (London: William Heinemann, 2003). This is not the place to debate whether Damasio's reading of Spinoza is correct: specialists are divided on this. I mention the issue only to illustrate that while in *Descartes' Error* the tone of the book was to point to the outdatedness of Descartes' hypotheses, in *Looking for Spinoza*, to the contrary, what Damasio emphasizes is precisely the current relevance of the Dutch philosopher.

<sup>17</sup> Spinoza, 'Ethics', 1985, I, Appendix, 440–41. As is clear from the quotes presented in this book, the three thinkers analyzed here (Spinoza, Marx, and Darwin) repeatedly refer, in their texts, to “man” or “men.” It is an undeniable conquest of the feminist movement to have attained, with complete justice, a broadening of this designation, convoking us to designate historical and real men and *women* (as well as all those who do not recognize themselves in a binary sexuality). If in this book the old terminology is maintained, it is due to the obvious reason that it is not up to me to change the passages of texts produced in another historical moment.

In his *Theological-Political Treatise* (published in 1670), Spinoza also discusses the function of ignorance as a producer of projections that reveal more about the one who makes them than the alterity of what was intended to be explained. Commenting on the common human reaction to that which exceeds a so-called standard of normality, the philosopher states that

it should occasion us no surprise that in Genesis men of extraordinary strength and great stature are called sons of God, although impious robbers and whoremongers. So any quality whatsoever whereby one surpassed all others used to be referred to God in olden days.<sup>18</sup>

It is therefore not only in facing natural processes that human unawareness produces projections: anthropomorphization is also repeatedly manifest in relation to other men. Monarchs are conceived, for example, as chosen by divine will. Furthermore, by refusing to adopt a transcendent causality, not only the *Ethics* but also the *Theological-Political Treatise* offer various examples of how Spinoza formulates his thinking. Chapter VI of the *Theological-Political Treatise* comments on the miracles presented in the Scriptures: Spinoza's interpretive effort consists in demonstrating that, upon close examination, the biblical text itself indicates that there were elements of natural causality operating in the supposed miracles. Thus, in the episode of the *Exodus* that tells of the invasion of locusts in Egypt, Spinoza points to the Scriptures reference to a "an east wind which blew a whole day and night" without which the invasion would not be understandable. This allows him to state that "a miracle in Scripture can mean nothing else [...] but a natural event which surpasses, or is believed to surpass, human understanding".<sup>19</sup> When this is considered, we need not be surprised with what would be an alleged rupture in the natural order, the miracle; we need simply to redirect it to the set of immanent causes responsible for its emergence. The philosopher will return to this theme in the *Ethics*, when he states that "the dispelling of ignorance would entail the disappearance of that astonishment."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Spinoza, 'Theological-Political Treatise', 400–1.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 448–49.

<sup>20</sup> Baruch Spinoza, 'Ethics', in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), I, Appendix, 241.



## BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY, “THERE IS NO RELATION”

Spinoza's critique of the anthropomorphic God raises questions regarding what he understood to be the relations between philosophy and theology. These fields of investigation appear to be strongly associated at various times in the history of thought. And it is not necessary to turn to the most evident examples of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas of Aquinas to corroborate the link between theology and philosophy. Centuries later, we also find in Hegel an understanding of philosophy that incorporates religious experience. In the Introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, there is the emphatic statement that “philosophy is theology, and [one's] occupation with philosophy – or rather *in* philosophy – is of itself the service of God.”<sup>21</sup> This general formulation would find in Hegel its specification in his adherence to Lutheranism: “we Lutherans – I am a Lutheran and will remain the same – have only this original faith.”<sup>22</sup>

Spinoza's position is quite distinct in this regard as well. One of the fundamental issues that permeates the *Theological-Political Treatise* is precisely the need to *separate* philosophy from theology, for reasons that are progressively demonstrated throughout the text. The strongest statement of this thesis can be found at the end of Chapter XIV:

between faith and theology on the one side and philosophy on the other there is no relation and no affinity, a point which must now be apparent to everyone who knows the aims and bases of these two faculties, which are as far apart as can be.<sup>23</sup>

Summarizing a long argument, what the *Theological-Political Treatise* sustains is that theology relates to the provision of rules of conduct to be followed in society. Spinoza's interest in the study of the Scriptures is not motivated by reasons specific to philosophical investigation (the search for truth and knowledge): he analyzes them as a historical document of a people. Spinoza is particularly interested in the function of laws in the

<sup>21</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 84.

<sup>22</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy I: Greek Philosophy to Plato* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 73.

<sup>23</sup> Spinoza, ‘Theological-Political Treatise’, 519.

Hebrew state, which scrutinized daily life from top to bottom, even in its most mundane acts: “They could not even eat, dress, cut their hair, shave, make merry or do anything whatsoever except in accordance with commands and instructions laid down by the law.”<sup>24</sup>

Upon analyzing the different regulatory functions found in Mosaic Law, Spinoza, as if removing the mantle from the sacred character that enveloped the biblical text, returned it to its condition as a human product, to be understood through the historical conditions in which it was produced. Analyzing the rigidity of the laws promulgated by Moses, Spinoza states that “To this he was urged by two considerations, the obstinate nature of a people who cannot be coerced merely by force, and the imminence of war.”<sup>25</sup> If Spinoza valued the Bible, this is due to the moral teaching it contained, and not for the statement of a philosophical truth. But nothing could be further from the prevailing understanding of the Scriptures in Spinoza’s time. The *Theological-Political Treatise* sparked passionate emotions, generating a hostile climate toward its author. Even representatives of more liberal religious currents of the time were strongly disturbed by the text. They perceived, not without reason, the extent of the rupture made by it. Philipp van Limborch sent the book to a friend in 1671, famously remarking:

I cannot recall having read so pestilential a book (*pestilentiorem*). He ridicules the prophets and apostles and according to him no miracles took place or ever can. [...] he describes God in such a way that he seems to entirely destroy him. I send it to you [...], so that you know what monsters are produced in our Holland (*quae monstra producat Batavia nostra*).<sup>26</sup>

In 1672, Johan de Witt, the Grand Pensionary of Holland, was assassinated and eviscerated by crowds supporting the monarchy, allied to the most intransigent sectors of Calvinism (the Gomarists). Within Holland’s highly convulsed political context, it would be more comfortable for Spinoza to seek some form of conciliation between theology and philosophy, as many did before and after him. But this was not his style. The following year, 1673, he refused an invitation from the Elector of the

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 439.

<sup>26</sup> Apud Georges Friedmann, *Leibniz et Spinoza* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1962), 203–4.

Palatinate to teach at the University of Heidelberg. In the invitation, sent by letter from Johannes Ludovicus Fabritius, the Elector assured him “the most extensive freedom in philosophizing.” But curiously, right after that, a restrictive clause: this liberty should not be used “to disturb the publicly established religion.”<sup>27</sup>

Spinoza gave two reasons for declining the invitation. The first is his preference to promote (*promovere*, in Latin) philosophy. The second was that: “I do not know within what limits the freedom to philosophise must be confined if I am to avoid appearing to disturb the publicly established religion.”<sup>28</sup> This episode reveals a lot about Spinoza’s regard for freedom of thought and expression. A liberty that imposes the limit of not disturbing the publicly established religion does not deserve to be called liberty.

\* \* \*

The extent of Spinoza’s break with the thinkers of his time was so great that contemporary scholars have difficulty in properly naming his philosophical project. If texts produced until the second third of the twentieth century frequently mentioned Spinoza’s *metaphysics*, today it is understood that this designation disregards indications present in Spinoza’s work. One of the consequences of an immanent view is also to dissolve the hypothetical ideal paradigms from which reality would organize itself. Idit Dobbs-Weinstein is right when she protests that “Spinoza has been understood even by some of his most attentive readers as a metaphysician.”<sup>29</sup> She cites Alexandre Matheron and Étienne Balibar—renowned philosophers—as examples of this misunderstanding. Dobbs-Weinstein recalls that those who attribute a metaphysics to the philosopher ignore “Spinoza’s

<sup>27</sup> Baruch Spinoza, ‘Letter 47, Fabritius to Spinoza [16 February 1673]’, in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 886.

<sup>28</sup> Baruch Spinoza, ‘Letter 48, Spinoza to Fabritius [30 March 1673]’, in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 887. Fernando Bonadia de Oliveira takes a closer look at the reasons presented by Spinoza for declining an invitation to teach at Heidelberg University. Oliveira places the arguments presented in the Letter to Ludovicus Fabritius in a consistent dialogue with other parts of Spinoza’s work. Cf. Fernando Bonadia Oliveira, ‘Por Que Espinosa Recusou o Convite Para Ser Professor de Filosofia Em Heidelberg?’, *Trilhas Filosóficas* 1, no. 1 (2008): 101–14.

<sup>29</sup> Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion and Its Heirs: Marx, Benjamin, Adorno* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 82.

major ‘metaphysical’ claim, namely, that nothing exists *meta ta physica*, that is, outside nature.”<sup>30</sup>

In fact, in a philosophy of full immanence, there is no room to speak of anything beyond nature (understood here in its broadest sense). A digital search in the *Ethics* reveals that there are only two references to *meta-physics* in the book, and both are negative. In the first, metaphysicians are grouped with theologians as having been entangled in the belief in a finalistic activity existing in nature, a belief that Spinoza completely rejects.<sup>31</sup> In the second reference, the *Ethics* denies the existence of “Metaphysical beings, or universal, which we are used to forming from particulars.”<sup>32</sup> These references are clarified when we consider that, for Spinoza, metaphysics is also a generalizing discourse that is not able to determine the singular entities and processes that it intends to know.

This is why “Peter must agree with the Idea of Peter, as is necessary, and not with the Idea of Man”,<sup>33</sup> a sharp formulation from Spinoza’s youth. This “idea of man” is an abstract universal, telling us little about the subject Peter, an unrepeatable singularity that cannot be grasped by such a general category. Based on these indications from Spinoza, some scholars place him close to the nominalist currents of philosophy existing in his time (those that rejected the existence of universals). But in my judgment, this approximation is superficial and misses what is more productive in his thinking. On the level of the modes, modifications of substance, Spinoza’s effort to grasp them in their singularity is in fact visible. On the other hand, Spinoza’s fundamental concept of substance (a constitutive principle of reality) is not compatible with the worldview of nominalism, which conceives reality as a discontinuous collection of objects with no relationship to each other. It is at this tense boundary between generality and singularity that Spinozism moved, and it is by digging into it that its most original meaning is produced.

We return, therefore, to the question of how to properly name the project developed by Spinoza. He himself was quite aware of the discontinuity he brought to the philosophical debate. The *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* refers to *mea Philosophia*, my philosophy, as

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>31</sup> Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, 1985, I, Appendix, 439–41.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., II, P. 48, Sch., 483.

<sup>33</sup> Spinoza, ‘Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being’, 87.

if to highlight the inaugural gesture that constituted his own authorial position, which is not to be confused with a metaphysics.

Without claiming to answer this difficult question, I observe that in recent years scholars from various backgrounds have opted to refer to a Spinozan *ontology*. I find this trend to be fruitful and will follow it here. Among Spinoza experts who invest in a new meaning for an ontology, we can cite the quite heterogeneous examples of Gilles Deleuze, Antonio Negri, Vittorio Morfino and Marilena Chauí.<sup>34</sup> In the Marxist field, the late work of György Lukács, *The ontology of social being*,<sup>35</sup> stands out as a defense of a contemporary ontological approach.

But here, some caveats are necessary. The first is that Spinoza himself did not use the category ontology: this must be said openly from the start. Thus, when we speak of a Spinozan ontology, we are making an *intervention* in his texts. But what reading does not intervene in the works it studies? It would be naïve empiricism to believe it is possible to maintain a relationship of total and complete congruence with the classic authors. We are always in an asymmetrical relationship with them; how often must this be emphasized? The option to introduce the category of ontology is due to the assessment that it offers insights into Spinoza (and the processes he analyzes). I will introduce some of these insights throughout this book. For now, I will only mention the example of *common notions*, an expression that Spinoza uses to designate certain ideas found in all men.<sup>36</sup> The basis of these common notions is not just the act of knowledge, that is, they are not only epistemological. They are also related to the corporeality of each one of us, which allows Marilena Chauí to correctly state that “the common notions are ontological,” they designate “a rationality operating in reality.”<sup>37</sup>

The other caveat to be made is that in its first historical appearance (also in the seventeenth century) *ontology* designated a discipline

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Deleuze, *Spinoza et le Problème de l'expression*; Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Vittorio Morfino, *A Ciência das Conexões Singulares* (São Paulo: Editora Contracorrente, 2021); Marilena de Souza Chauí, *Política em Espinosa* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> György Lukács, *Para Uma Ontologia do Ser Social*, 2 vols (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, 1985, II, P. 40, Sch. 2, 478.

<sup>37</sup> Chauí, *Política em Espinosa*, 313.

concerned with the study of being as such, and was still committed to metaphysical suppositions that are not compatible with Spinoza's perspective. It will thus be necessary to resignify the modern conception of ontology; only through this resignification, we will be able to maintain a productive relation with the best moments of the previous philosophies. After all, there is no notary's office where the exclusive meaning of each philosophical category is registered. What we do have is a sharp debate between different authors. In other words, in defending an ontology, no one is thinking of a fixed and stable Being. It is about addressing a reality *in motion*, which exists beyond our desires. In Chapters 5 and 6 of this book, we will see that this ontological approach, far from canceling the subjective dimension of being, formulates it with greater precision. In particular, the ontological perspective is fruitful because, when properly updated, it provides elements for an opposition to the prevailing epistemologism (which ends up reducing all of philosophy to a matter of language).

What at first appears to be only a secondary issue—the proper characterization for Spinoza's project—is in reality *a symptom of the difficulties of contemporary philosophy itself*. For when an important segment of twentieth-century and twenty-first-century philosophy excessively privileged the philosophy of language with the acceptance of the idea that all philosophical problems could be solved only by a linguistic explanation, the conditions were created for the predominance of an epistemologism that disregards fundamental questions in the history of thought. With this crucial caveat in mind—and now beginning to pave the way that will lead us to Marx—I recall that the first condition to constitute an immanent ontology, on the path opened by Spinoza, will be to undo the duplication of the earthly world in another (celestial) world. The result of this operation will be to affirm this world of ours as the ground that should guide our thinking. When in 1843 Marx wrote that “criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism,”<sup>38</sup> he could affirm this because the path of an immanent philosophy had already been opened.

<sup>38</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law’, in *MECW*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 175.

## MARX: IMMANENT CRITIQUE OF CAPITALIST SOCIETY

In 1841, at the age of twenty-three, Marx transcribed in his study notebooks extracts from Spinoza's correspondence and from the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Altering the expository sequence of the text, as if highlighting the aspects most dear to him, Marx wound up creating a unique work: a notebook made up of extracts from Spinoza, but connected according to Marx's own perspective.<sup>39</sup> A document of great relevance, it attests to the young Marx's interest in Spinoza's critique of theology, with implications for political theory as well. However, this reading from youth did not leave more lasting textual marks throughout Marx's oeuvre.

In fact, when it comes to examining the relationship between Marx and Spinoza, overly conclusive postures should be avoided. One such is to dogmatically maintain that "the Spinoza invoked here or there by Marx and Engels is in any case an occasional, second-hand Spinoza, misinterpreted in the very act of his citation."<sup>40</sup> This statement by Bensussan and Cachon is not aware of what has just been presented: Marx rewrote by hand the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

Another position, situated at the opposite extreme, consists in affirming that Spinoza was the true philosophical pillar that allowed Marx to construct his work. Since this position appears to have defenders in the most recent debate in the field, a comment is opportune. A textual and philological examination of Marx's work does not warrant such a conclusion, for at least three reasons. The first is that, with the exception of the Notebooks of 1841, citations of Spinoza are quite rare in Marx's writing as a whole. In works considered to be a synthesis of Marx's first philosophical studies, such as *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, or the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Spinoza is not cited even once. In the texts on political economy, we find highly condensed references to *determinatio est negatio* (a famous Spinozan formulation), as

<sup>39</sup> Cf.: Karl Marx, *Cuaderno Spinoza* (Barcelona: Montesinos Ediciones de Intervención Cultural, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> Gérard Bensussan and Jean-Luc Cachon, 'Spinozisme', in *Dictionnaire Critique du Marxisme*, ed. Gérard Bensussan and Georges Labica (Paris: Presses Universitaires France, 1985), 1082.

when Marx discusses the relationship between production and consumption.<sup>41</sup> And when referring ironically to vulgar economics, he also states that, unlike Spinoza, the economists believe that “ignorance is a sufficient reason”<sup>42</sup>—a free quotation, not literal, of a passage from the *Ethics*.

The second reason is that, by contrast, Marx abundantly cites the authors he works on, whether agreeing or disagreeing. The economists David Ricardo and Adam Smith, for example, are a constant presence in Marx’s published works and preparatory manuscripts. This type of interlocution is not found with Spinoza. The third reason—and perhaps the most troubling—is that in a book published in 1845, *The Holy Family* (written jointly with Engels), references to Spinoza are *negative*. He is grouped with Descartes, Malebranche and Leibniz under the generic rubric of “the metaphysics of the seventeenth century.” In *The Holy Family*—a text published four years after the *Spinoza Notebooks* of 1841—when Spinoza appears, it is as an obstacle to be overcome.<sup>43</sup>

For these reasons, to transform Spinoza into a recurring and lasting influence on Marx would be to force the reading according to our contemporary wishes; textual and philological research of Marx’s texts does not warrant an attribution of this order.<sup>44</sup> That said, the existence of an immanent approach to reality is still noteworthy—precisely the point to be developed here—inviting the reader to investigate at his own risk a connection between the two thinkers. Far from being a novelty, this connection began to be made in the nineteenth century by G. Plekhanov and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by M. Rubel, P. Macherey, A. Negri and A. Tosel (other more recent authors will be cited later in this book). In sum, even though references to Spinoza are rare in Marx’s texts, the dialogue between the two authors is fruitful for all those dissatisfied with a religious metaphysics (of which, as we saw earlier, Spinoza

<sup>41</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’ (*Grundrisse*), in *MECW*, vol. 28 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 28.

<sup>42</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1982), 422.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘The Holy Family’, in *MECW*, vol. 4 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 125, 129.

<sup>44</sup> For a different argument than the one I support here, I refer the reader to the study by André Tosel, ‘Pour une étude systématique du rapport de Marx à Spinoza: remarques et hypothèses’, in *Spinoza au XIXe siècle: Actes des Journées d’Études Organisées à la Sorbonne, 9 et 16 mars, 23 et 30 Novembre 1997*, ed. André Tosel, Pierre-François Moreau, and Jean Salem (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2007).



is quite critical), a metaphysics that today spreads through the ideological superstructure of societies.

With this clarification, let's consider an excerpt of an 1837 letter from the young Marx to his father. In it, Marx—still a student, and certainly far from developing the mature formulations that received the name of Marxism—directly touched the theme examined here, while referring to his dissatisfaction with German philosophical idealism: “I arrived at the point of seeking the idea in reality itself. If previously the gods had dwelt above the earth, now they became its centre.”<sup>45</sup>

“Seeking the idea in reality” is a fundamental Marxian motif, it guides the thought toward the immanence of the real, preventing philosophy from escaping into alienated speculation, an evasion that is precisely one of Marx's recurring criticisms of German idealism. The primacy comes to be the historical reality, and no longer concepts developed by Hegelianism, such as the Idea, or Spirit. Here, we have a first affirmation of the primacy of objectivity, the primacy of the real world that demands investigation into its heterogeneity, in relation to the subjects who formulate their questions about it.

An observation on the concept of *idealism*. Michael Heinrich, to whom we owe many excellent contributions in the field of Marxism, has been claiming that the category, as used by Marx, is not suitable to designate Hegel's thought.<sup>46</sup> However, I will maintain the term (idealism) for two reasons. The first is that textual research on Feuerbach, for instance, clearly indicates that this author, opposing Hegel, also contrasted idealism with materialism.<sup>47</sup> The second and more important reason is that when Marx called Hegel an idealist, this is a *position assumed* by Marx, with a strong authorial meaning. In this regard, it is not so important how Hegel's contemporaries saw him, but how Marx saw him: as *a philosopher identified with theology*, the classic form of idealism. Position statements that identify the interlocutors with non-consensual categories are found in various moments in the history of thought. We need only recall Spinoza's criticism of Descartes, or Darwin's criticism of Lamarck.

<sup>45</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Letter from Marx to his Father, in Trier, November 10, 1837’, in *MECW*, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 18.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Darren Roso, ‘Interview with Michael Heinrich’, *Historical Materialism*, 2018, <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/interviews/interview-with-michael-heinrich>.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), xiii–xiv.

Returning to Marx's trajectory, the initial intent of the aforementioned letter to his father—to look for the idea in reality—becomes progressively more complex, assuming much more defined contours. Thus, in the opening of his Introduction to the 1843 *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, we find an explicit polemic with religious thought. Marx writes that "Man, who looked for a superhuman being in the fantastic reality of heaven," "found nothing there but the reflection of himself, [...]." <sup>48</sup> Religion is formulated here as the result of a projection of an anthropomorphic image. If the most immediate source of this statement is Ludwig Feuerbach (who in his book *The Essence of Christianity* had developed his concept of religious alienation), it also evokes Spinoza's procedure, by criticizing those who project human categories onto what they do not know. The text continues by emphasizing worldly needs, the extremely precarious situation of the German reality ("*the vale of tears*") that demands an ideal complement, an imaginary satisfaction of real needs. In that vein, we find Marx's famous formulation of religion as the opium of the people, in reference to its anesthetic functions in the face of an extremely hostile reality. Understanding the criticism of religion as the precondition of all criticism, Marx reminds us that "the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth."<sup>49</sup> That is, it will be necessary to go beyond the realm of religious discourse to find the earthly ground where it casts its roots, a necessary condition for transforming "the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*."

These brief considerations show that even in 1843 Marx ends up pointing to a different path from that of Feuerbach (a thinker who allowed him, at an early stage of his intellectual development, to formulate a first critique of Hegel). Summarizing a long trajectory, it is correct to say that Marx maintained the most productive nucleus of the Feuerbachian category of religious alienation: the duplication of man in an anthropomorphic projection, God, which comes to imaginarily dominate him.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law', 175.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>50</sup> It is a controversial issue to precisely determine the point at which Feuerbach's notion of religious alienation was influenced by Spinoza, considering the ambivalent position of the former in relation to the latter. In the 1843 *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Feuerbach complimented Spinoza as the "Moses of modern free-thinkers and materialists." But in the *Provisional Theses for the Reformation of Philosophy*, of the same year, Feuerbach assumed the predominant Hegelian interpretation that the Spinozan substance

But at the same time, he progressively distances himself from Feuerbach's naturalism, which sees man as too immersed in his natural foundation. *The German Ideology* (1845/46), a text written with Engels, states more clearly the distance from Feuerbach:

He does not see that the sensuous world around him is not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society; and, indeed [a product] in the sense that it is an historical product.<sup>51</sup>

We thus see that the objective world contains human activity, activity originating from subjects (subjective, in the formulation of the *I Thesis on Feuerbach*). This means that the *primacy of objectivity—a fundamental Marxian thesis—should never be interpreted as an objectivism*, as that would prevent understanding of the subjective action. It is, therefore, the awareness of active human dimension embodied in reality that Marx claims is absent in Feuerbach's philosophy. If the latter sees in Manchester “factories and machines, where a hundred years ago only spinning-wheels and weaving-loom were to be seen,”<sup>52</sup> this is not due only to a pure unfolding of natural processes. The objectification of human activity is responsible for this gigantic modification of reality. We are facing the emergence of a singular world; no longer can it be reduced to its formative moments. Thus, if we return for a moment to the project that the young Marx had announced to his father—to seek the Idea in reality—we see that what he finds is not an incarnate Idea, but a world already profoundly transformed by human activity.

At the same time, it can be found here, albeit in an initial form, the matrix of the Marxian category of *labor*, a form of human activity: transformation of nature to satisfy needs. If it is an error to suppose that there is a finality commanding natural processes (an anthropomorphism Spinoza justly challenged), in the realm of the labor process the postulation of finalities is an unavoidable reality. The objective of the laborer, his

lacks reflection, and referred pejoratively to it as “this dead and phlegmatic thing.” Cf. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings* (London: Verso, 2012), pages 196 and 154, respectively.

<sup>51</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, in *MECW*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 39.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

purpose, “determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it.”<sup>53</sup>

However, in differing from Feuerbach, when Marx insistently points to the importance of labor in modifying reality, this is not in the way of naively valorizing labor. That is, it is not about exalting the experience of labor in the expectation of something like the redemption of humanity (a misreading of Marx committed by Hannah Arendt), but about discerning, above all, its undeniable impact on natural and social reality. Marx captures labor in its contradictory quality: a historical form of humanization of man, yes, but one that arose from within an *Entfremdung* (an alienation or estrangement). The *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* affirm that “all human activity hitherto has been labor – that is, industry – activity estranged from itself,”<sup>54</sup> however much this statement clashes with the common image of Marx. In Chapter 6 of this book, I will develop more fully the impact of human labor not only on the objective world, but also on the subjectivity of each worker. For now, it is sufficient to note that there is no romantic idealization of labor in Marx, but rather a grasp of its complexity. Analyzing the exploitation prevailing in bourgeois society, in *Capital* we read that “To be a productive worker is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune,”<sup>55</sup> a statement that would be incomprehensible if Marx held the perspective of the productivity apologists.

The debate about the correct predication of the category of labor in Marx continues to today. Can it be said that labor is trans-historical, an experience common to various societies? Or, to the contrary, should it be viewed above all by the marks it leaves in capitalist societies? Marx clarified that as concrete labor that produces use values, labor is a perennial category, “the universal condition for the metabolic interaction [*Stoffwechsel*] between man and nature.”<sup>56</sup> However, the situation changes if the investigative emphasis is on labor that generates value, which Marx conceived as abstract labor. The predominance of abstract labor requires long-term

<sup>53</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 284.

<sup>54</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 110.

<sup>55</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 644.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

historical preconditions, notably the separation of workers from the objective conditions of production, which come to form an alienated entity, capital. The complete domination of this labor will only occur in a capitalist society, even if a partial existence of value-creating labor can be found in the local circuits of older societies.

The generalization of abstract labor more radically subverts the natural order: concrete labor itself becomes subordinated to an objectified logic that surpasses it. Regularities are formed that can no longer be derived from the natural order: value, surplus value, capitalist production, competition, etc., these categories constitute a distinct level of causality. *This is also the meaning of the immanent laws in the mature work of Marx.* At a decisive moment in theorizing the origin of capital, we can read that “The transformation of money into capital has to be developed on the basis of the immanent laws of the exchange of commodities, in such a way that the starting-point is the exchange of equivalents.”<sup>57</sup> That is, the structure of *Capital* does not authorize the introduction of parameters external to the argument to be developed. The argument seeks an *immersion* in the logic of the object as a condition to properly deciphering it.

Marx’s writings on political economy also show us that he adopts a non-linear concept of causality,<sup>58</sup> in which effects are converted into causes, forming a complex totality in permanent movement. This conception is completely different from a Laplacian determinism, which believed it was possible to predict the future development of a process through its initial configuration. The internal dialectic of a complex totality, however, does not prevent Marx from referring to a *predominant moment* (*über-greifende Moment*) with greater causal power.<sup>59</sup> This is what can be read in the Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*, an analysis of the

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 268–69.

<sup>58</sup> To avoid misunderstandings, it would also not be correct to affirm that Spinoza’s causality is linear: the *infinito causarum nexu* (infinite connection of causes) does not allow an understanding of this nature. On the other hand, I maintain that the incorporation of *contradiction* into the theory of causality is in fact a distinctive feature of Marx.

<sup>59</sup> Further indications of Marx’s adoption of a dialectical view of causality can be found in *Value, Price and Profit*. This text warns workers of the limits of a struggle purely over wages. “they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady” Karl Marx, ‘Value, Price and Profit’, in *MECW*, vol. 20 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 148.

relationship between production and consumption, in which production has the following role:

Consumption as a necessity, as a need, is itself an intrinsic moment of productive activity. The latter, however, is the point where the realisation begins and thus also its *dominant moment*, the act epitomising the entire process.<sup>60</sup>

Deciphering a contradictory reality requires a dialectical approach: the Marxian theory of causality is made more complex by the fact that it seeks to mirror *contradictions* existing in reality itself. A fundamental category in Marx's thought, contradiction and contradictory processes affect not only the interior of a given entity, but also the broader historical course. In *Capital*, Marx emphasizes the antithesis between use value and the value of a given commodity, that is, between the tangible material properties of the commodity and abstract universal labor:

There is an antithesis, immanent in the commodity, between use-value and value, [...] the antithetical phases of the metamorphosis of the commodity are the developed forms of motion of this immanent contradiction.<sup>61</sup>

It is impossible not to register here Marx's debt to Hegel, who formulated extensively and in detail what a contradiction is and how it is constitutive of the genesis and development of being. Regarding the presence of Hegelian categories, even if deeply altered and reconstructed according to Marx's own worldview, I refer readers to the Excursus at the end of this chapter.

### SELF-EXPANDING VALUE

Once a properly social causality has been established in human societies, it is indispensable to point out the impact of *value* as a process in continuous expansion in capitalist society. Initially generated by human labor objectified in commodities, value expands not through exchange, but through the appropriation of surplus labor characteristic of the relation between capital and labor. The formulation of the expansive character of

<sup>60</sup> Marx, 'Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858', 31, my emphasis.

<sup>61</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 209.

capital comes early in Marx's work: not content with the local or national market, capital moves decidedly toward international accumulation. The statement of this ongoing drive for capital expansion can already be found in Marx's texts from the 1840s. In *Wage Labour and Capital* (1849), this mechanism is vividly described:

That is the law which again and again throws bourgeois production out of its old course and which compels capital to intensify the productive forces of labour, because it has intensified them—the law which gives capital no rest and continually whispers in its ear: “Go on! Go on!”<sup>62</sup>

But when Marx reaches a more detailed understanding of the process of expansion of value, this still descriptive statement from 1849 acquires the contours of a conceptual formulation in the fullest sense. Using a method that progresses from the most apparent level of the reality (the commodity, object of the first chapter of *Capital*), to the underlying mechanisms that structure it (value, abstract labor, etc.), Marx will arrive at surprising results. Among them, for instance, a more secure formulation of the distinctive determinations of abstract labor, of the difference between value and exchange value, and perhaps most all, of the peculiarity of the human labor power as a commodity that, when consumed, generates more value than necessary for its reproduction. We find in *Capital* a radiograph of the successive metamorphoses of value (commodity, money, capital), which thus acquires the characteristics of an automatic subject, expanding value:

It is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in this movement; it thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject. [...] For the movement in the course of which it adds surplus-value is its own movement, its valorization is therefore self-valorization.<sup>63</sup>

The automatism of value, always in search of a new investment and of new valorization, allows Marx to say that it behaves like a peculiar *subject* (able to *posit* its predicates). Given that no place in the world is independent of this logic, the totality of life on the planet passes under the aegis of

<sup>62</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Wage Labour and Capital’, in *MECW*, vol. 9 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 224.

<sup>63</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 255.

the automatism of value. This process of accumulation not only exploits labor power, but, using examples from our twenty-first century, promotes successive fiscal adjustments, dismantles public institutions, imposes social security reforms and devastates nature in search of the valorization of value.

It is time to address a topic that cyclically returns in the debates in political economy: the proclamation, made by some prominent intellectuals, of the obsolescence of Marx's theory of value. Incidentally, it was an author who sought to integrate the contributions of Spinoza with Marx who is among the representatives of this trend. We refer to Antonio Negri, who maintains that the expansion of immaterial labor and the expansion of so-called cognitive capitalism are responsible for the arising of a new historical moment, superseding the validity of value and its theory.<sup>64</sup>

This assessment, however, does not find support in the more specialized debate underway within Marxian political economy. This debate shows us that the theory of value, far from having lost its relevance, is precisely the conceptual framework necessary to understand the examples mentioned above, as well as the cyclical crises that affect capitalist economies. Certainly, it is not a matter of directly transposing Marx's theorization to the twenty-first century, but of constructing, based on his seminal insights, the contemporary mediations that specify our historical moment. The fragility of Negri's position in this regard is made clear by a vast international Marxist bibliography<sup>65</sup> that has been going in a very different direction from that pointed out by the Italian author. Among the many topics found in this debate, I mention only that what is conventionally called *immaterial labor in no way cancels the basic processes of extraction of surplus value, accumulation and capitalist expropriation*, which continue on a planetary scale. Negri and the enthusiasts of immaterial labor have generalized to the entire international economy some observable trends in very specific sectors of capitalist production. This

<sup>64</sup> "Even Marx's theory of value pays its dues to this metaphysical tradition." Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 355. The authors state that we live in "a new regime of *production*." Ibid., 205.

<sup>65</sup> I refer readers particularly to the articles of the excellent dossier on immaterial labor organized by Henrique Amorim, 'Dossiê – O Trabalho Imaterial em Discussão: Teoria e Política', *Caderno CRH* 27, no. 70 (January/April 2014), 35–37. Amorim argues that, for not having sufficient clarity about the category of *abstract labor* in Marx, the defenders of the centrality of immaterial labor (including Negri, Gorz and Lazzarato) confuse distinct levels of theorization in political economy.



generalization does not consider the fact that more sophisticated forms of labor—which are also subjected to capital—coexist with traditional exploitation, even including slave labor in the twenty-first century. It is not by chance that this idealization of “cognitive capitalism” roughly corresponds to the place in the social structure occupied by intellectuals (producers of symbolic goods, to use an expression from Pierre Bourdieu), who suppose that the advent of an international network such as the internet was able to overcome structural contradictions of capitalist logic.

### CATEGORIES AS “FORMS OF BEING, DETERMINATIONS OF EXISTENCE”

Marx’s studies in political economy decipher the logic that presides over this estranged process that is value in expansion on a planetary scale. The correct understanding of capitalist society depends on capturing this development intellectually. Thus, the already mentioned immanent causality is also a hallmark of Marx’s theory of knowledge. If until now we have been conducting this examination within the scope of a social ontology, the time has come to enter the Marxian theory of knowledge, which can only be adequately exposed in light of this social determination. In short, how is it possible to properly know a historical reality that is in permanent becoming? What is the relationship between categories of analysis and the reality they intend to decipher? These are old philosophical questions that find in Marx a singular elaboration.

Let us take a well-known example from the author himself on the relation between categories of analysis and reality: his considerations on *labor in general*, a category first developed by Adam Smith.<sup>66</sup> Despite his differences with the Scotch economist, Marx acknowledged that Smith should be recognized for demonstrating that it is not only agricultural labor or manufacturing labor that generates wealth (as previous thinkers supposed), but labor in general.<sup>67</sup> This apparently simple formulation could not have been reached in previous epochs: even authors with whom

<sup>66</sup> Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’, 41–42.

<sup>67</sup> In the formulation of *Capital*, the common substrate of the different forms of human labor is the fact that they are “a productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands etc.” Marx, *Capital*, 134.

Marx had a respectful relationship, such as Aristotle (“the great investigator who was the first to analyze the value-form, like so many other forms of thought, society and nature”<sup>68</sup>), were not able to decipher the mechanism of value production. It would be wrong to suppose that the difficulties of conceiving value, a product of labor in general, occurred due to a subjective limit of the Greek thinker. It was the historical reality in which Aristotle lived that was the limiting factor: the predominance of slave labor in ancient Greece was the objective supposition preventing the formulation of the aforementioned category. Only with the advent of bourgeois society does labor cease to form a unity with the objective conditions of production (as took place in antiquity and in feudal servitude), differentiating itself from them and allowing workers to, at least formally, successively dedicate themselves to distinct activities. The category of labor in general appears only in this situation as the theoretical counterpart of a *de facto* reality. This occurred, not by chance, in the bourgeois society of the eighteenth century, when “the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, Marx’s decisive statement: “the categories express forms of being, determinations of existence.”<sup>70</sup>

*Here we re-encounter a conception of immanence.* The example shows us that the relation between the categories and reality is more than a mere accident. What exists is a constitution of categories of analysis within the same real process that they seek to decipher. This concept also differs from Kantian dualism—highly influential in contemporary philosophy and social sciences—which maintains an exteriority between categories and reality, the “thing in itself” remaining inaccessible to human knowledge (an open door to various relativisms, as we see today).

Recognition of the historical roots of the categories will have decisive consequences for the critique of political economy. It raises the question: how to integrate categorical and *critical* exposition? To be more explicit: how can the categories of political economy—which concern the specific logic of capitalist society—be properly presented and at the same time making a critique of this reality transparent? This is the project that Marx announced in an important 1858 letter to Ferdinand Lassalle:

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>70</sup> Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’, 43.

The work I am presently concerned with is a *Critique of Economic Categories* or, if you like, a critical exposé of the system of the bourgeois economy. It is at once an exposé and, by the same token, a critique of the system.<sup>71</sup>

An old project of Marx attained only later in life: to combine in a single movement the *exposition* and the *critique* of economic categories. The exposition of the theme must be internally organized in such a way that it makes the critique explicit. In this precise sense, immanent critique differs from criticism that proceeds in a way that is external to the object under analysis; for example, contrasting the bourgeois society under examination to an ideal parameter, such as a society of free men and women. It is certain that Marx's communist political project—an emancipated humanity—remained firm throughout his life and work. But the theoretical mode of presenting the viability of this project undergoes modifications throughout the oeuvre. It becomes the result of an extensive argumentative course, one that set itself the task of immersing itself in the logic of capitalist society. Only after a detailed journey into the object under examination, only after exposing the insurmountable impasses of the capitalist mode of production, does the text more explicitly announce its political project. This takes place in Chapter XXIV of *Capital*, which declares in programmatic terms: "The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated."<sup>72</sup>

The gains provided by immanent critique are considerable: in addition to those already cited, *the expansion of the book's readership beyond active socialist circles* should be highlighted. The argument developed in *Capital* continues to reverberate more than a century after its publication, even with content that is directly contrary to prevailing worldviews. In contrast, the writings of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen, who criticized capitalism by opposing real society with the imaginary projection of an ideal society, found a much smaller reading public. And there is no doubt that Marx's *Capital* continues to stir strong emotions: if the work is periodically declared outdated, just then there is a vigorous rebirth of interest in it. When Thomas Piketty launched his *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* in 2013, he felt compelled to repeatedly affirm that he is

<sup>71</sup> Karl Marx, 'Letter to Ferdinand Lassalle, February 22, 1858', in *MECW*, vol. 40 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 270.

<sup>72</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 929.

not a Marxist. This only illustrates the argumentative force and disturbance produced by Marx, which the French economist sought to oppose more than a century later.

### “THEY HAVE NO READY-MADE UTOPIAS TO INTRODUCE *PAR DÉCRET DU PEUPLE*”

Just as the critique of bourgeois society must appropriate the categorical apparatus produced by political economy and show its limits (limits that ultimately correspond to the reality investigated), revolutionary political action must operate from within this society, and not from an external, ready-made utopia. Objective processes are formed from within capitalist society—with evident subjective repercussions—that point to the possibility of another societal logic. At a crucial moment in *The Civil War in France*, when Marx analyzes the action of the working class in the Paris Commune, he states:

They have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple* [by the people’s decree]. [...] They have no ideals to realize, but to set free elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.<sup>73</sup>

This is a decisive formulation: bourgeois society itself generates within it the elements for a new society. This means that Marx’s view of capitalist society is complex, capturing distinct and contradictory tendencies operating within it. The best-known dimension of this view is the Marxian critique of alienation and the brutal exploitation found in capitalism. Less visible to the non-specialized public is the fact that Marx also identifies in capitalism tendencies that have an emancipatory meaning that emerges from capitalist alienation (as much as this may be difficult to understand given our Cartesian heritage, which presents us with mutually exclusive alternatives in the face of the same reality). The political consequence of recognizing these tendencies is quite evidently the need to establish an affirmative relationship with the progressive social forces operating at a certain historical moment, instead of staying cloistered in a theory.

<sup>73</sup> Karl Marx, ‘The Civil War in France’, in *MECW*, vol. 22 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 335.

The most instructive contrast to be made here is once again with the utopian socialists, who immediately opposed existing capitalist society to an ideally imagined socialist society. The latter would be brought as a “ready-made utopia” into the current historical moment. Distancing himself from this approach, Marx proposed to discern within reality itself those tendencies that point to the possibility of a transformation. For this reason, he hailed the emergence of co-operative factories in his *Inaugural Address of the Working Men’s International Association*. Even recognizing that it would be naive to believe in a revolution based on a quantitative increase of co-operative labor—and insisting on the importance of the conquest of political power<sup>74</sup>—the *Inaugural Address* points to the real historical discontinuity that this labor carries with it, by no longer requiring “the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands.”<sup>75</sup>

To combat the alienated expansion of value, only political action—which goes beyond the purely economic moment of the mode of production—can ally itself with new social trends and take them to their final consequences. In this space, which is not dominated by economic logic in the strict sense, the importance of political action plays a decisive role. It’s as if authors as different as Marx and Spinoza (in his seventeenth-century defense of democracy) meet at this junction, pointing to immanent tendencies that authorize the investment in a revolutionary political project.

In this chapter, I examined thinkers whose work was produced in distinct historical moments, responding to distinct problematics. That said, I sought to underscore the extent of the rupture each one made with the prevailing ideological discourses of their era. In particular, both Spinoza and Marx criticized transcendent promises, which feed on the fear spread among men and women (“To such madness are men driven by their fears”<sup>76</sup>). These promises promote a discourse that projects to a beyond that which cannot be found in the capitalist world: an experience of agency in determining our own trajectories. It is in this point that the criticism of the religious imaginary is intertwined with political action.

<sup>74</sup> “To conquer political power has therefore become the great duty of the working classes.” Karl Marx, ‘Inaugural Address of the Working Men’s International Association’, in *MECW*, vol. 20 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 12.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>76</sup> Spinoza, ‘Theological-Political Treatise’, 388.

## A BRIEF EXCURSUS: HOW NOT TO ENDORSE THE “HEGEL OR SPINOZA” DICHOTOMY

Perhaps one of the greatest difficulties for researchers developing a productive articulation between Marx and Spinoza is the recurring unfavorable image of Hegel presented by some contemporary Spinozist authors. They criticize Hegelian thinking so severely that it comes to be seen as an obstacle to a contemporary appropriation of either Marx or Spinoza. In 1977, Pierre Macherey published a book whose title expressed this dichotomy: *Hegel or Spinoza*. And what do we find in this work?

Firstly, Macherey merits recognition for consistently showing interpretive errors Hegel made in his approach to Spinoza. It has already been mentioned here that in addition to being a philosopher, Hegel was also a historian of philosophy, presenting an evolutionary history of Western thought (where he himself was the apex of this claimed evolution). Explicitly acknowledging Spinoza's greatness, Hegel criticized him at the same time in a way that would gain adherents many years later. The criticisms include the famous accusation that Spinoza's substance is rigid: “the rigidity of substance lacks the turning back into itself.”<sup>77</sup> Macherey correctly points to the problematic nature of Hegel's investment in an evolution of ideas in general and moreover of the place that Spinoza would have in it. The French philosopher does very well in steering contemporary readers back to Spinoza's own work, showing that most of Hegel's criticisms lack textual support. On the other hand, the book makes clear Macherey's inability to establish a productive relationship with Hegel. It is as if all of Hegelianism were a mistake, to be overcome through a correct absorption of motifs already found in Spinoza. Hence, the statement: “We say ‘Hegel or Spinoza,’ and not the inverse, because it is Spinoza who constitutes the true alternative to Hegelian philosophy.”<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 283.

<sup>78</sup> Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 12. In the 1990 Preface to the second edition of the same work, Macherey offers a more nuanced view of the relationship between Hegel and Spinoza, as if inviting his readers to mitigate the harshness of his earlier comments. He even feels obliged to make a long comment—not very persuasive—to claim that the conjunction “or” in the title of his book (*Hegel or Spinoza*) does not have an exclusionary meaning. Cf. *Ibid.*, 4–6. But it is impossible not to wonder why this explanation was not made somewhere in the 250 pages of the first edition.

Macherey's position toward the two philosophers is not isolated. Antonio Negri, with well-known influence in vast sectors of the international left, in his book *The savage anomaly* refers to Hegel as "that great functionary of the bourgeoisie," who had ceded to the "the sordid game of mediation."<sup>79</sup> Completely rejecting any dialectic approach—which he believes to be a theoretical equivalent to the political mediations of bourgeois society<sup>80</sup>—Negri takes to its ultimate consequences his defense of a theory and praxis that dispenses with dialectics. His proposal is *a Marxism without dialectics* (and without a theory of value, as we saw above). Thus, Negri diverges with Alexandre Matheron and bets on Spinoza's axiomatic method:

What seems open to criticism in Matheron's work is essentially his method, his inclination to introduce into the analysis of Spinozian thought dialectical or paradiialectical schemes, [...]. There is a fundamental incompatibility between a dialectical method and an axiomatic method [...].<sup>81</sup>

I agree with Negri when he states that Spinoza's defense of democracy, already in the seventeenth century, was obviously a much more advanced position than Hegel's endorsement of constitutional monarchy (in the early nineteenth century). This is certainly not irrelevant to the density of Spinoza's position: there are deeper presuppositions here, with different productive consequences. However, Negri's next step will be to completely deny the importance of Hegel's philosophy, disregarding this thinker's particular complexity. Negri's procedure is also problematic for a certain conception of the history of philosophy as a story in which there are heroes to be exalted (Spinoza) and villains to be repudiated (Hegel), and those who opt for one must automatically consider the other an adversary. It is important to recall that Marx made explicit statements that clearly recognize his debt to Hegel, despite important criticisms. Thus, in the Afterword to the second edition of *Capital*, he wrote "I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker [Hegel]."<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, 140–41.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>82</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 102–3.

Fortunately, and especially from the 2000s onwards, it is possible to detect a change in this panorama of hostility toward Hegel among a new generation of Spinoza researchers. Jason Read correctly states with good humor that “The task is not to choose between Team Hegel and Team Spinoza, but to interrogate each by means of the other [...]”.<sup>83</sup> Instead of a unilateral choice for a given philosopher, there is an effort to construct relations that respect the singularity of each one. In this sense, the Spinoza specialist Mariana de Gainza proposes not to reject the dialectic but to engage in “fundamental dialogues with the broad field of the dialectical tradition – dialogues that, as we say, should be of great help to the good ‘health’ of contemporary Spinozism.”<sup>84</sup>

In an effort to contribute to overcoming the dichotomous view Hegel *or* Spinoza, I will briefly mention two contributions by Hegel that had a particularly fruitful development in the history of Marxism.

The first refers to the Hegelian claim that being is not just an affirmative entity: there are *contradictions* within it. This concept had been rejected by Spinoza in the *Ethics*: “No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause.”<sup>85</sup> The *conatus*, the effort to persevere in being, is an intrinsically affirmative positivity in the thought of the Dutch philosopher.

In contrast, Hegel presents us the contradictory reality that constitutes any being:

Something is alive, therefore, only to the extent that it contains contradiction within itself: indeed, force is this, to hold and endure contradiction within. If, on the contrary [...] it were not capable of harboring contradiction within it, it would not then be a living unity as such, not a ground, and in contradiction it would founder and sink to the ground.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Jason Read, ‘Beginnings Without Ends: A Review of Pierre Macherey, Hegel or Spinoza’, *New APPS: Art, Politics, Philosophy, Science*, 10 January 2012, <https://www.newappsblog.com/2012/01/jason-read-reviews-the-new-translation-of-pierre-macherey-hegel-or-spinoza.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Mariana de Gainza, ‘Spinoza: Uma Filosofia Materialista do Infinito Positivo’ (Doctoral thesis, Programa de Pós-graduação em Filosofia Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas da Universidade de São Paulo, 2008), 197.

<sup>85</sup> Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, 1985, III, P. 4, 498.

<sup>86</sup> Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 382–83.



Being contains contradiction, it is the motor of its development. An entity is not only destroyed by external causes: forces operate within it that can range from difference to opposition, until they reach contradiction. We just saw that in Marx's analysis of the antithesis found in commodities between use value and value, it is possible to recognize the centrality of contradiction as the motor of a development. Assuming certain Hegelian insights with his own words—indeed, deeply altering them—Marx shows us that the antithesis present in commodities is successively amplified until it becomes a contradiction in the full sense, which will always occur in a historical reality. Consequences notwithstanding, the agents involved are not aware of this progressive contradictory development. As we can read in *Capital*: “this immanent contradiction does not enter the head of the individual capitalist, or the political economists who are imbued with his view.”<sup>87</sup>

A second extremely rich theme developed by Hegel—and practically disregarded by Spinozan Marxism—refers to the “*determinations of reflection*” (*Reflexionsbestimmungen*). They are a reconstruction of those categorical pairs formulated as mutually exclusive by prior philosophical tradition, such as essence and appearance, content and form, identity and difference, etc. Hegel made the undeniable advance of breaking from an old dichotomous approach to categorical pairs—which found its apogee in Kant—showing the internal connection existing between their constitutive poles. “But their truth is their connection,”<sup>88</sup> we read in *The Science of Logic*, a text that shows us the “turning over” (*Umschlagen*) of the categories, one on the other. Hegel's *Umschlagen* is a clear indication that the former procedure of *isolating* an entity in order to examine it carries the high cost of abstracting its foundational set of relations.

The consequences of Hegel's innovative perspective reached Marx. The clearest example can be found in his analyses of the relation between labor and capital:

<sup>87</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 531.

<sup>88</sup> Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 92.

Let us first analyse the simple determinations contained in the relationship of capital and labour, in order to discover the inner connection, both of these determinations and of their further developments, to what has gone before.<sup>89</sup>

Following this statement from *Grundrisse*, we find another demonstration by Marx of the impossibility of separating the contradictory unit formed between capital and labor. If this is a trivial recognition for anyone with a Marxist background, it is not the case of several heralds of post-modernity, who continue to announce a supposed new historical era, in which machines would dispense with human labor. Against this idealization of technology, it is always necessary to recall that there is no capital that dispenses with human labor (nor Japanese robots...): they are inter-linking poles of the same contradictory relationship. Unlike what the theories of the “end of labor” announce, the fact is that precarious labor is growing massively across the globe, whether in its traditional forms, or in the rise of an info-proletariat, a category used<sup>90</sup> to designate the growth of workers in the informatic sector who face extremely adverse living conditions in full twenty-first century. The contradictory dialectic between labor and capital finds one of its toughest expressions even in sectors of advanced technology and high concentration of capital.

Returning to Hegel, there is not the slightest doubt that he brought seminal contributions to the philosophical debate. The importance of thematizing contradictions and his acuity in handling the *determinations of reflection* are only some of them. Other Hegelian acquisitions could be cited, such as his efforts to develop a theory of intersubjectivity in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*. They are illustrative of how misguided is the project that, because of some mistakes of Hegel—however real they may have been—defends a Marxism purged of any dialectic.

<sup>89</sup> Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’, 197.

<sup>90</sup> Ricardo Antunes and Ruy Braga, *Infoproletários: Degradação Real do Trabalho Virtual* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2009).

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## Toward a Theory of Emergence: Marx with Spinoza

The search for a dialogue between the work of Marx and Spinoza dates back to at least the late nineteenth century: Georgi Plekhanov can be cited as one of the theoreticians and activists who made efforts in this direction. Since the second half of the twentieth century, attempts to develop a so-called Spinozan Marxism<sup>1</sup> were strengthened by the works of Maximilien Rubel, Louis Althusser and Antonio Negri, to name only a few. This interpretive effort yielded influential texts in philosophy<sup>2</sup> and the debate continues to this day.

There are certainly important differences (including political) among the defenders of Spinozan Marxism, but some themes are recurrent in the debate. Among them, the following stand out: a critique of the presupposition that there are hidden purposes commanding the development of history (a presupposition that takes root in a teleological matrix present in Hegel); and the consequent *intensification of the present moment* caused by the refusal to await a goal—a *telos*—to be realized in the future. In

<sup>1</sup> The expression Spinozan Marxism can generate some misunderstandings, such as an incentive to deny Hegel's contributions to Marxism (a posture with which I do not agree for the reasons presented in Chapter 2). That said, this expression has been used by some authors like Eugene Holland, among others. Cf. Eugene Holland, 'Spinoza and Marx', *Cultural Logic* 3 (1998): 1–17.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this chapter, the texts and authors that are being introduced at this moment will be duly cited.

terms of political theory, we find a repeated criticism of the state as an oppressive formation that subjugates its citizens, characterizing a form of alienation. More generally, there is a call for men and women to rise above their heteronomy and come to be subjects of their history in the here and now.

Curiously, however, one aspect of the greatest relevance has been little addressed in this attempt to bring Marx and Spinoza closer. I refer to Marx's explicit refusal to derive social and political relations from natural phenomena. Indeed, a recurring theme in Marx's criticism of the economists of his time is that they implicitly assumed that the relations in a mercantile-capitalist society are based in natural phenomena. At the same time, it is also true that in Spinoza's polemic with the prevailing approaches of his time, he insistently asserts that man is a *part of nature* and follows its general laws; Spinoza's criticism falls upon those who, ignoring such belonging to nature, treat man as "a dominion within a dominion."<sup>3</sup> It is also worth recalling that the philosopher has been positively received by some authors linked to contemporary environmentalism (such as Arne Naess) precisely for his refusal to prioritize and separate man from his natural foundation.

The objective of this chapter is precisely to follow the unfolding of the question that can be summarized as: *Does Marx's critique of the naturalization of social relations apply to Spinoza?* Or, inverting the terms of the question (for those who have greater affinity with the thought of the Dutch philosopher): would the Marxian analysis be enhanced by an approach that shows that human relations cannot be detached from their natural foundation?

Using here a terminology that has been growing for the past few decades, I argue that Marx's work includes elements of a theory of emergence that also benefit an understanding of Spinoza. This theory, which will be developed further on, shows us how more complex levels of being *emerge* from their original natural foundation and acquire their own logic that can no longer be reduced to that of their formative moments. When Marx writes in *Capital* that "nature does not produce on the one hand owners of money or commodities, and on the other hand men possessing

<sup>3</sup> Baruch Spinoza, 'Ethics', in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), III, Preface, 491.

nothing but their own labour-power,”<sup>4</sup> this statement can be interpreted based on a theory of emergence. To summarize a long debate, capitalist society does depend structurally on the nature upon which it is founded, but it has acquired a peculiar (and contradictory) rationality, that of the extraction of value, which is qualitatively different from what is found in nature. The task here is to specify the distinct stratifications that manifest themselves in this appearance and in this emergence.

As for the contemporary importance of a theory of emergence, we can recall that in the year 2020 alone at least two texts were released that illustrate its productivity. In his *The Return of Nature*, John Bellamy Foster conducts a careful historical review of Marxist perspectives articulated with the ecological question. Of these, Foster highlights “Emergentist Marxism,” asserting that “all of the Marxian scientists examined here embraced an emergentist, evolutionary view [...]”<sup>5</sup> A striking feature of this perspective is to oppose the different types of reductionism, present in mechanical materialism. Also in 2020, the bicentennial of the birth of Friedrich Engels, as a contribution to be developed by a contemporary materialist dialectic, philosopher Kaan Kangal highlighted the category of emergence in natural sciences studies conducted by Engels. His article *Engels’s Emergentist Dialectics* offers a general overview of Engels’s contributions on the subject.<sup>6</sup>

That said, the objective of this chapter is to analyze how an emergentist perspective can help clarify some still little explored aspects of the relationship between Marx and Spinoza. This thematic nucleus can be summarized as follows: how to better formulate human presence within the broader system of mundane causality? How to escape the two symmetrical dangers rightly denounced by Spinoza and Marx, respectively, to treat the human presence in the cosmos as “a dominion within a dominion” or conversely, naively naturalize social relations?

As a supplementary objective, the chapter will also address Spinoza’s criticism of certain ideal theoretical models that consider human history to

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1982), 273.

<sup>5</sup> John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Kaan Kangal, ‘Engels’s Emergentist Dialectics’, *Monthly Review* 72, no. 6 (1 November 2020), <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/11/01/engelss-emergentist-dialectics/>.



be chronically occurring under the aegis of lack or a paradigmatic insufficiency. In their place, the Dutch philosopher proposes an open-ended history in the making, where it would be mistaken to expect a *telos* that could serve as a parameter for an appraisal of its becoming. Here, too, a dialogue with Marx benefits both authors, and it is necessary to examine, for example, whether the rejection of Hegel by more recent defenders of Spinoza (such as Antonio Negri) is justified, or whether the Hegelian dialectic can be recuperated, even if in a modified categorial framework. This conceptual discussion influences efforts to find alternatives for the left in our twenty-first century, as it struggles to construct viable directions for thought and action.

A final introductory remark: due to the very content of what is argued here, it was necessary to turn to the contributions of authors writing after Spinoza to highlight some singularities of his position. In some philosophical circles, this procedure is not well regarded. Above all, an internal philological analysis is proposed, one whose perimeter is the classic author's text. Here, in contrast, combined with an internal analysis is a comparison with other authors, fully cognizant of an insuppressible asymmetry between us, subjects of the twenty-first century, and a seventeenth-century thinker. Celebrated texts of Gaston Bachelard—well received in some segments of the Marxist debate—advise us that for a better approach to knowledge, it is not enough to know the strict internal relations of its concepts. It is necessary to go beyond the conceptual space in which a thinker moves and steer toward a dialogue with contemporary thought. It is the study of the *present* of a debate—as disconcerting as this may seem—that allows better access to its past.<sup>7</sup> In other words, I am not proposing a hagiography of Spinoza—there is no need for that—but rather his dialogue with questions of our historical moment.

## SPINOZA: “WE ARE A PART OF THE WHOLE NATURE”

[...] we are a part of the whole of nature, whose order we follow.

B. Spinoza<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *L'engagement rationaliste* (Paris: PUF, 1972), 139–42.

<sup>8</sup> Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, IV, Appendix, 594.

Let's start with Spinoza. As is well known, in practically all the fields in which he produced, he made very significant changes in the philosophical tradition. Whether in ethics, in theory of knowledge or in political theory (a courageous defense of democracy at a time of monarchy rule), the roar of Spinoza's thunder continues to reach us even today.

The scope of the revolution he made was well registered in the Hegelian saying, "either *Spinozism or no* philosophy."<sup>9</sup> Although Hegel himself soon afterwards raised a series of objections to Spinozism that gained adherents (a supposed stasis of his system, as well as the absence of a dialectical negativity, for example), this Hegelian criticism has been strongly questioned by more recent authors. Diverging from Hegel, they present us with Spinozism as a route that has not been traveled and not properly explored in the history of philosophy. In this perspective, it can be recalled the classic work of Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*.<sup>10</sup> Instead of the predominance of a teleological conception of history (a trajectory followed by Hegel, as we will see), there is in Spinoza a decisive affirmation of a modal plurality that does not allow itself to be confined by a previously formulated model of how the historical course should be.

To initiate the debate, I return to Spinoza's concept of *substance* as the foundation on which his thought is built. Here as well, Spinoza made considerable changes to the philosophical tradition. While from an Aristotelian perspective each entity has its own substance (different entities therefore have different substances), the Dutch philosopher affirmed the unity of substance, sustaining it as an immanent cause that is constitutive of all reality. Spinoza formulated in an impressive way our belonging to a broader causal network: this is perhaps one of the reasons for the vigor that his reading exerts even today. It is frequent among those who appreciate Spinoza to relate how they felt part of a cosmos when reading his seminal text, the *Ethics*: he shows us that we are finite parts of an infinite substance.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of nothingness (or even ontic lack)—so dear to certain authors—has little to do with Spinoza's philosophy, which is an affirmation of substantial activity unfolding at all levels of reality. Even the trivial

<sup>9</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, 'Vorlesungen Über Die Geschichte Der Philosophie III', in *Werke*, vol. 20 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 164.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Spinoza, 'Ethics', IV, P. 4, 549.

fact that we are here, reading or writing a text, only takes place in the realm of extension and thought, attributes of the uncreated substance. For this reason, as explained in the previous chapter, I agree with those authors who affirm that, with the proper rectifications, the concept of ontology is much more compatible with Spinoza than that of metaphysics. Finite beings—in Spinoza’s language “modes,” modifications of infinite substance—express, each in its determined manner, the power of the infinite substance. Distinguishing himself from centuries of idealist tradition that divided the world of humans from the world of ideas, Spinoza shows us our rootedness in the very substance that constitutes us and makes action and thought possible.

His famous expression *Deus sive Natura* (God or Nature) is understood in this context. This is a singular conception of what God is, in every regard far from Judeo-Christian theology. When one reads *God* in Spinoza, the term can be substituted by *immanent cause*, which is also expressed in its effects. Precisely in not separating man from his belonging to substance, Spinoza refuses conceptions that ignore this ontological foundation. In an approach that has generated consequences of the greatest relevance throughout the history of thought, we find a critique of the metaphysical view that fails to recognize the inner rationality of the human and natural world. In a polemic with centuries of idealist tradition, Spinoza affirms human society as an extension of the natural order:

Most of those who have written about the Affects, and men’s way of living, seem to treat, not of natural things, which follow the common laws of nature, but of things which are outside nature.<sup>12</sup>

Note the reference to men as “natural things, which follow the common laws of nature”: this point will merit greater attention in comparison with Marx. Spinoza continues his preface to part III of the *Ethics* by saying that such theoreticians “seem to conceive man in nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man disturbs, rather than follows, the order of nature [...]”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., III, Preface, 491.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., III, Preface, 491. On the use of the category “man” (rather than, for example, men and *women*) by the classical authors analyzed here, see note 17 of Chapter 2.

There are at least two recipients of this criticism. In a more general sense, it is addressed to theological approaches that placed men in a situation of rupture and of eminence in relation to other natural beings (from a hierarchical conception of genera and species). More specifically, it is also a criticism of a political theory that radically separates men from their natural foundation. Against these interlocutors, Spinoza tells us that those who intended to write an ethics ended up producing a satire, making “extravagant praise on a human nature that nowhere exists” and reviling “that which exists in actuality.”<sup>14</sup>

The issue I want to examine in greater detail is that, when some insights from later philosophies are consulted, it is striking that Spinoza did not go deeper into the qualitative differences that exist between the natural foundation and the developments that arise from it. For in his courageous polemic with the tradition of his time, Spinoza moves quite directly between phenomena that, strictly speaking, require more detailed analysis. Everything occurs as if the indisputable belonging of men to nature were also the guarantee of deciphering the logic that commands their actions. As an example of this assumption, let us read the following passage from the *Theological-Political Treatise*, which concerns the natural right of each individual:

fish are determined by nature to swim, and the big ones to eat the smaller ones. [...] it is the supreme law of Nature that each thing endeavours to persist in its present being, [...] And here I do not acknowledge any distinction between men and other individuals of Nature [...].<sup>15</sup>

The theory of the *conatus* underlies passages like this. The *conatus*, the effort to persevere in being, is a law of nature that is present both in men and in animals (such as fish). Of course, it would be mistaken to say that Spinoza is unaware of the singularity of human activity in relation to that present in other entities: he is a philosopher too keen to ignore this obvious difference. In Chapter XVII of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, we find what is perhaps Spinoza’s most emphatic pronouncement on the discontinuity of the human laws in relation to nature. Upon asking

<sup>14</sup> Baruch Spinoza, ‘Political Treatise’, in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 680.

<sup>15</sup> Baruch Spinoza, ‘Theological-Political Treatise’, in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 526–27.

himself the reasons why the Hebrew state was destroyed, Spinoza refuses the hypothesis that it was due to a supposed unsubmitive nature of the nation. In his lucid words, “nature creates individuals, not nations, and it is only difference of language, of laws, and of established customs that divides individuals into nations.”<sup>16</sup> The text continues by arguing that it is only through inherited laws and customs that a nation can be said to have a particular character.

But this recognition of the singularity of human laws is not accompanied by a discussion about the emergence of a peculiar causality, which distances itself from its natural foundation and comes to acquire a logic of its own. When Spinoza distinguishes natural laws from human laws, he does so by stating that “these latter laws depend on human will.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout this chapter, we will see that laws (in the sense of regularities) are formed in the social world that do *not* depend on human decisions. Moving forward here in a contribution from Marx: the law of value is an example of this. Initially arising in the exchange of commodities, it acquires a causal force that starts to constrain all those subjected to its validity: its impact permeates social relations from end to end. Whereas in Spinoza the programmatic statement found in his *Ethics* prevails: “All things, I say, are in God, and all things that happen, happen only through the laws of God’s infinite nature and follow [...] from the necessity of his essence.”<sup>18</sup> The human world is certainly recognized for its singularity, comprising choices and political decisions that led Spinoza to write not only the *Ethics*, but acute texts such as *Theological-political Treatise* and the *Political Treatise*. But even in the latter work (recognized as the most advanced moment of Spinoza’s political thought), the very institution of the civil order is thought of as an extension of the state of nature:

in a state of Nature and in a civil order alike man acts from the laws of his own nature and has regard for his own advantage. In both these conditions, I repeat, man is led by fear or hope to do or refrain from doing this or that.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 548.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 426.

<sup>18</sup> Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, I, P. 15, Schol., 424.

<sup>19</sup> Spinoza, ‘Political Treatise’, 690.

I underscore here the *postulation of a continuity between the state of nature and the civil order*. Differences certainly exist: “in the civil order all men fear the same things, and all have the same ground of security, the same way of life.”<sup>20</sup> But Spinoza warns us that we should not lose sight of the common ground: men always act according to the laws of their nature. This is what allows us to understand the laconic response that the philosopher gave to Jarig Jelles, who had asked him what was the difference between his (Spinoza’s) political conception and that of Hobbes. Spinoza responded by saying that unlike Hobbes, “I always preserve the natural right in its entirety.”<sup>21</sup>

Arriving at this point in the exposition, it is now appropriate to hear how some knowledgeable interpreters of Spinoza’s thought address this topic, and furthermore to test the viability of the reading presented here. I begin with Antonio Negri, who examines Spinoza’s political thinking in his book *The savage anomaly*:

The State, even though it is defined on a contractual basis, is not a fiction; *it is, instead, a natural determination, a second nature*, constituted by the concurrent dynamics of individual passions and guided toward this end by the action of that other fundamental natural power: reason.<sup>22</sup>

For a contrasting perspective, let us hear Marilena Chauí. In her *Política em Espinosa* [*Politics in Spinoza*], she clearly states:

This means that civil law extends natural law and that political life is natural life in another dimension [...]. This [the law] institutes politics based on human nature, defined as part of nature and as a natural power or desire [...]. *Spinoza establishes the natural foundation of law* [...].<sup>23</sup>

Despite their differences in perspective, the words of the two interpreters are clear. Spinoza formulated the state as a second nature; law

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 690.

<sup>21</sup> Baruch Spinoza, ‘Letter 50, Spinoza to Jelles [2 June 1674]’, in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 891.

<sup>22</sup> Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 110, my emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> Marilena de Souza Chauí, *Política em Espinosa* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003), 240, my emphasis.

establishes the political field based on human nature. Both Negri and Chaui insist, following the Dutch philosopher, on discoursing at length on the mistakes of those who cut men off from their natural determination. Contrary to those who assert the artifice of state formation, its ontological foundation is to be found in human passions, and this foundation is natural.

### MARX: "NATURE DOES NOT PRODUCE OWNERS OF MONEY"

A confrontation between Spinoza and Marx proves to be productive precisely at this point. For anyone who has followed the trajectory of the latter knows that in texts such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* he initially affirms that "Man is directly a natural being".<sup>24</sup> However, what the *Manuscripts* offer that is new is the presentation of the profound impact of human activity on natural determination, transforming man into a *human* natural being.<sup>25</sup>

This understanding will be deepened in Marx's polemic with Feuerbach. Early in his trajectory Marx recognized the Feuerbachian attempt to distance himself from the idealism of Hegel (who affirmed the primacy of the Absolute Spirit as a fundamental reality): Feuerbach emphasized the precedence of the sensory world over the alleged spiritual. However, as his work advanced, Marx pointed to serious limits in Feuerbach that are very pertinent to this discussion. The author of *The Essence of Christianity* disregards the presence of human activity in the configuration assumed by the sensory world. That is why, in the difficult and decisive *First Thesis on Feuerbach*, Marx writes that the principal insufficiency of all previous materialism is the fact that "things [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively."<sup>26</sup>

This means that the sensuous world no longer exists in its original form, as it has been transformed by the activity of successive human

<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 154.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in *MECW*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 3.

generations. There is human presence (which in this sense is a subjective presence, because it comes from subjects) even in what seems most natural to us: "He [Feuerbach] does not see that the sensuous world around him is not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society."<sup>27</sup>

For Marxist researchers, it is nothing new to maintain that for a number of centuries we have lived immersed within a gigantic set of artifacts created by human action. Man is part of nature, yes, but the *appropriate categorial network to analyze natural phenomena is no longer adequate for the world of human affairs*, since a logic of its own emerged from them that, although not violating natural laws, constituted a distinct level of causality. For this reason, and now returning to Spinoza, when at the beginning of his *Political Treatise* he affirmed that human passions will be treated as if they were properties of nature, this affirmation was undeniably revolutionary for its time: it established a decisive rupture with theological approaches. Today, however, this naturalist project must be complemented: it needs to include the full extent of the impact generated by human action over the centuries (and this is what the theory of emergence that will be discussed further on is about).

Continuing in the trajectory taken by Marx, also in the polemic with political economy we find a development of the theme under consideration here. He insistently points to what seems to him to be one of the most vulnerable aspects of economists: the naturalization of social relations. They take to be natural relations what in reality are products of historical development; this procedure obscures the long passage of time that separates capitalist society from its most remote origins. Moreover, this naturalization reveals conservative political consequences: institutions such as private property acquire within this perspective the status of an eternal and inexorable reality. Among the numerous passages in which Marx examined the issue, I highlight one where he comments on the origin of the relationship between those who possess money and those "possessing nothing but their own labour-power":

<sup>27</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'The German Ideology', in *MECW*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 39.



nature does not produce on the one hand owners of money or commodities, and on the other hand men possessing nothing but their own labour-power. This relation has no basis in natural history, [...] It is clearly the result of a past historical development [...].<sup>28</sup>

The passage is decisive: the affirmation of the historicity of capitalist society is an effective antidote for a wide variety of errors. But does an understanding of this kind end up raising a kind of Chinese wall between men and nature? We shall see that it does not, because Marx's formulation above all indicates that natural determinations are insufficient to understand social relations. This relationship does not involve an exclusion between man and nature, but an exchange that acquires increasingly mediated characteristics. To use the words of Lukács, who toward the end of his life became interested in questions related to the emergence of more complex levels of being from their natural base, this exchange consists in the substitution of "pure natural determinations by mixed ontological forms, belonging to naturalness and to sociality." This makes it possible to "develop, from this base, the purely social determinations."<sup>29</sup>

We could perhaps argue that these critical considerations do not apply to Spinoza himself—a philosopher whose writing is certainly denser than Feuerbach, or even than the political economists—since in his *Ethics* he refers to an *essentia actuosa* (active essence), expressed in its infinite attributes. Indeed, Spinozism duly registers within the active substance modal activity as well: modes, finite beings, generate effects on one another. But this is still a very generic formulation, because when Spinoza speaks about human affairs, he is easily caught making statements that are quite vulnerable, especially for the reader informed by the Marxian theoretical achievements already mentioned. This is what takes place when the *Ethics* discusses the correct posture of "a man strong in character." He must understand that:

[...] all things follow from the necessity of the divine nature, and hence, that whatever he thinks is troublesome and evil, and moreover, whatever seems immoral, dreadful, unjust, and dishonorable, arises from the fact that

<sup>28</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 273.

<sup>29</sup> György Lukács, *Para Uma Ontologia do Ser Social*, vol. 1 (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2012), 289.

he conceives the things themselves in a way that is disordered, mutilated, and confused.<sup>30</sup>

In a letter to Blyenbergh, we find a practical illustration of this position presented in the *Ethics*. Spinoza writes to his correspondent that, by recognizing that “all things come to pass as they do through the power of a most perfect Being,” he lives “in peace, joy and cheerfulness” and is thus able to “ascend a step higher.”<sup>31</sup> The procedure consists in strongly forging human events to divine (substantial) nature: Spinoza is appeased and finds tranquility when he does this. From this point of view, it is enough to change a “mutilated and confused” interpretation, in the words of the *Ethics*, to conceive in another way what initially seemed “dreadful” and “unjust.”

Perhaps Spinoza would not feel in such a comfortable position if he took into account Marx’s considerations. For he would see the drama of human lives lost daily due to an economic system that operates—not according to the power of “a most perfect Being”—but in an alienated way. As a matter of fact, in his texts on political theory Spinoza offers the reader the possibility of a more transformative interpretation of social reality. But even there, as we saw in the passages quoted above, there remains an ambiguity in the relations between natural determinations and those that historically unfold from human action.

The fact is that the further we advance in the history of humanity, the more we are forced to recognize the intervention in immanent causality of a series of forces, emerging from this same causality but that modify its original configuration. Among these forces, Marx especially emphasizes human activity as a modifier not only of natural reality, but also of the human species.

### HUMAN LABOR: DISCONTINUITY IN THE NATURAL WORLD

To speak of the importance of human activity in the modification of the sensory world is to also speak of human labor, a fundamental dimension of

<sup>30</sup> Spinoza, ‘Ethics’ IV, P. 73, 587.

<sup>31</sup> Baruch Spinoza, ‘Letter 21, Spinoza to Blyenbergh [28 January 1665]’, in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 822.

this activity. Labor links together two processes that for a long time were formulated in an antagonistic way in the history of thought: causality and teleology. Let's examine this more closely.

When we work, we modify an existing causal network in the world, introducing forces into it that generate new processes and objects. But this is not done blindly; there are categories of finality operating within the labor process. This is what Marx tells us in his famous passage where he states that:

what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. [...] Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [*verwirklicht*] his own *purpose* in those materials [...].<sup>32</sup>

Far from being a secondary characteristic, the postulation of a finality—a teleological position—decisively guides the unfolding of the labor process. That said, it should immediately be added that *this teleology is only valid within the scope of the labor process and in those actions motivated by a purpose (as is the case, for instance, of political action)*. Beyond this, what continues to exist are impersonal causal processes. To interpret the historical course as a whole using teleological categories is a grave error, denounced justly and precisely by Spinoza. However, in the restricted scope of human activity, the presence of an activity driven by purposes is inescapable. The error consists in broadening and projecting the teleology existing in the labor process to the historical process as a whole, a procedure that transforms human history into “a person ranking with other persons” and endowed with will. We can read this in Marx's polemic with the young Hegelians, writers of a teleological history who mistakenly attribute to the discovery of America the hidden finality of “to further the eruption of the French Revolution.”<sup>33</sup>

Various critics of Marx affirm that his own conception of history is finalist—and see Hegel's influence in this—but passages such as the one

<sup>32</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 284, my emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> Marx and Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, 50. The word used in the text cited is the “discovery” (*Entdeckung*) of America. Contemporary historiography questions this expression, which creates the understanding that the American continent was an uninhabited desert before the arrival of the colonizers. But this just proviso does not affect the core of what is being discussed here.

just mentioned point in another direction. To be sure, it is possible to find in Chapter XXIV of *Capital* or in the *Communist Manifesto* some statements that are more vulnerable to this criticism. They are occasions in which Marx appears to place excessive confidence in the future advent of a socialist society, which could be interpreted as a finality inscribed in the historical process. In the words of Chapter XXIV of *Capital*: “capitalist production begets, with the necessity of a natural process, its own negation.”<sup>34</sup> However, the point to be emphasized here is that this finalist trait can be rectified through other reflections provided by Marx himself.<sup>35</sup>

Returning to the analysis of the repercussions of the labor process in the objective world, it is crucial to keep in mind that it presents a *discontinuity in the system of impersonal causes*<sup>36</sup> *in force until then*. Whereas in earlier historical moments there was only the impersonal transformation of a given being into another being—as takes place when the rain falls on the earth, for instance—with the rise of labor, men and women come to direct their activity toward a purpose. With regard to the thinkers who have deepened our understanding of the discontinuity caused by human labor in the natural world, it is necessary to give proper credit to Hegel (an author from whom, in other moments of this book, we differ on account of his uncritical endorsement of theology). Unlike Spinoza, who rejected the existence of final causes,<sup>37</sup> Hegel was able to grasp the categorial difference created in the world by human labor. In his *Jena Lectures*, he states:

<sup>34</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 929 (translation revised according to the German original).

<sup>35</sup> Chapter 4 of this book will present passages from Marx that rectify this idea of an “inexorability of a natural process” for human societies.

<sup>36</sup> Or, alternatively, *immanent efficient causes*, to emphasize that the effects produced are not external to them.

<sup>37</sup> “[...] all final causes are nothing but human fictions.” Spinoza, ‘Ethics’ I, Appendix, 442.

it happens also in order that nature's own activity be employed – the elasticity of the watchspring, [the power of] water, wind – so that, in their sensory existence, these do something other than what they [ordinarily] would do. Their blind doing is made purposeful, in opposition to themselves.<sup>38</sup>

Lukács praised Hegel's contribution, maintaining that an important step had been taken toward understanding the dialectic of labor in the world.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, we know that Hegel excessively and unduly extended the teleology existing in the labor process to other spheres of being and history, becoming vulnerable to various criticisms. But this does not prevent us today from making more precise and sober use of the dialectic existing in labor. *Through it, impersonal causality is transformed into a posited causality, with all the immense consequences of this transformation for the natural and human world.* This involves objective and subjective consequences: ideal moments emerge here, representing the objective to be achieved by labor and establishing a dialectic between materiality and ideality. From the world that was guided only by natural causality without intentionality, a qualitatively different world emerges precisely from the continuous externalization of human activity. It is our human world: our lives are spent in it.

## THE CONCEPT OF EMERGENCE

The reference to the importance of labor provides the opportunity to address the theory of emergence, which has much to offer this discussion. This theory tells us that more complex levels of being continuously emerge from their original foundation:

A property of a complex system is said to be 'emergent' just in case, although it arises out of the properties and relations characterizing its simpler constituents, it is neither predictable from, nor reducible to, these lower-level characteristics.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, 'The Philosophy of Spirit', in *Hegel and the Human Spirit: A Translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805–6)*, ed. Leo Rauch (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 104.

<sup>39</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations Between Dialectics and Economics* (London: Merlin Press, 1975), 344–46.

<sup>40</sup> Jaegwon Kim, 'Emergent Properties', in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford University Press, 1995), 224.

For those unfamiliar with the concept of emergence, to speak of a “lower level” requires immediate clarification. This is not an evaluative approach that attributes a “better” or “worse” meaning to this or that dimension of the reality in focus. At stake is the correct depiction, for example, of the processes historically necessary for the emergence of life from the inorganic level. To synthesize: an inorganic being can exist without the presence of an organic being, however, *the inverse is ontologically impossible*. The history of our planet Earth is a living witness to this. For millions of years, only inorganic nature existed, a fact confirmed by scientific research especially since Darwin. On the other hand, the emergence of organic being—and later of social beings—necessarily required the foundational presence of the inorganic world, which living beings depend on to maintain their vital metabolism. Obviously, plants require mineral elements to be able to live and reproduce; social beings, in turn, need an organic being with a metabolism for their existence.

In 1967, Marxist historian Zbigniew Jordan published his book *The Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*, offering a very clear formulation of emergence:

material reality has a multilevel structure; each of these levels is characterized by a set of distinctive properties and irreducible laws; and each level has emerged from temporally prior levels according to laws which are absolutely unpredictable with respect to those operating at the lower levels.<sup>41</sup>

In relation to this general formulation, other authors attribute greater emphasis than Jordan to the *relation* between the different levels of being (organic and inorganic for example), as we will soon see. But first, it should be mentioned that there are certainly many objections to the theory of emergence. Principal among them, and perhaps most evident, is that the theory has strong ties with the natural sciences, and it would be imprudent to transpose it to the social sciences. Authors such as Niklas Luhmann and Gunther Teubner are familiar examples for their problematic transposition of the contributions of biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to the realm of social relations. However, a more careful and circumscribed use of the concept of emergence can be made;

<sup>41</sup> Zbigniew A. Jordan, *The Evolution of Dialectical Materialism: A Philosophical and Sociological Analysis* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1967), 167.

in fact, this has been carried out at least since the first third of the twentieth century, as mentioned. This procedure is of particular interest to those who are interested in establishing a dialogue between Marxism and other fields of knowledge.

In this regard, let us return to the words of Lukács, who is hardly suspected of flirting with any naturalist concept of social relations. Even before the more recent expansion of the concept of emergence, Lukács (who died in 1971) had already made considerations that are surprising for their thematic proximity with the debate in focus here. In his *Ontology*, written toward the end of his life, while we may differ with some of his positions, he validates a theory of levels of being that deserves full attention.

Lukács's text takes care to point out the error of transposing categories from biology to social relations, and offers another fundamental warning: Lukács simultaneously recognizes the insurmountable organic foundation of the social being and warns that under no circumstances should it be disregarded.<sup>42</sup> Historical study from a *longue durée* perspective shows us human groupings continuously modifying their original natural foundation and generating levels of objectivity (and also subjective dispositions) that increasingly distance them from that foundation. The question that interests us concerns the correct conception of these levels that are simultaneously distinct and interlinked along the historical process. In Lukács's words: "The being of the sphere of life is based on inorganic nature as irrevocably as the social being is on the whole of natural being." Hence the need, he continues, to point out "the following common trait: in the two realms, it is only possible to reshape the traits of being of a lower level of being, never eliminate them."<sup>43</sup>

We know that the expression "a lower level of being" is *not* being used in an evaluative sense; it only indicates that inorganic being is necessarily prior to organic, just as social being has the first two as preconditions. Therefore, although it is possible to "reshape" (*Umgestalten*) natural determinations, they cannot be eliminated. Lukács also adds that:

<sup>42</sup> Although not the subject of this discussion, it is worth mentioning that in the *Ontology* he wrote late in life, Lukács formulates the relationship between nature and society in a very different way from *History and Class Consciousness*, the celebrated text of his youth.

<sup>43</sup> György Lukács, *Para Uma Ontologia do Ser Social*, vol. 2 (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2013), 171–72.

From the joint social action of men seeking the reproduction of their life [...] arise totally new and qualitatively distinct categories and relations that [...] also have a modifying effect on the biological reproduction of human life.<sup>44</sup>

In a first moment of analysis, the categories of nature are thus affirmed as the inextinguishable base upon which human activity operates successive transformations. In this sense, even the latest generation computers and the internet can be considered as “part of nature,” to use Spinoza’s famous expression. However, the continuation of the analysis obliges us to highlight the emergence of new determinations, which imprint decisive alterations on their foundational base, including biological reproduction, as mentioned in the last passage quoted.

The concept of emergence addresses precisely processes like this one: the laws of the first level of being (the most basic, the inorganic) prove to be manifestly insufficient to understand what is happening in the new reality that has emerged. With regard to social being, the development of labor and the acquisition of language are responsible for the emergence of gigantic complexes of buildings, artifacts and communications systems that are far removed from an original nature.<sup>45</sup> This is why Lukács states that an ontology of the social being can only be constructed on the foundation of an ontology of nature. However, and this caveat is decisive, it is not possible to base the “first on the second in an excessively unitary, excessively homogeneous and direct way.”<sup>46</sup> A distinctive feature of social being is also the existence of very accentuated *contradictions* between the processes that specify it, demanding analytical categories capable of elucidating contradictory forces.

We are now in a better position to take up the previous considerations on Spinoza. I intend to demonstrate that the *Dutch philosopher moves very directly between distinct levels of an ontology (or, if we prefer, a theory of emergence)*: from the natural foundation to political regimes. The perception of what we now call the specific legality of each of the levels of

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>45</sup> Due to space limitations, we restrict the analysis to the labor process, but Lukács also addresses the importance of language in this emergence of specifically human determinations.

<sup>46</sup> Lukács, *Para Uma Ontologia do Ser Social*, vol. 1, 186.



being, requiring a “finer” categorial network to account for their specificity, is still embryonic in his work. Nature mostly acquires a function of exemplarity in Spinoza’s text.

To recognize this does not in any way diminish Spinoza’s greatness: he was and continues to be an enduring vertex in any debate about immanence. It only alerts us to the fact that even in seventeenth-century Holland—a country known for its strong commercial development—a more robust theorization about certain basic relations of a capitalist economy was not yet available. When Marx developed his theory of value (the “new object of the world” in the expression of Wolfgang Maar<sup>47</sup>), he benefitted from a complex trajectory taken by political economy in the eighteenth century and in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Value, surplus value, money, concrete labor and notably, abstract labor: these are some of the categories developed (and rectified) by Marx in his debate with political economy.

### FOR A PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARX AND SPINOZA

At this point, it must be clarified that it would be a grave mistake to consider the argument made here as an invitation to interpret Spinoza’s thought as a whole (or, to a different extent, Hegel’s) as having been entirely absorbed and rectified by Marx. Based on this interpretation, one might ask: why, after all, study previous philosophers, if they will be rectified by more recent authors?

The moment has come to face the difficult question of how to establish a productive relationship between the different philosophers. With this intent and as an entry to the debate, let us recall a text by Althusser that discusses Lenin’s claim that to have a correct understanding of Marx’s *Capital*, it is necessary to conduct a previous philosophical study of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. Yet Althusser inverted the terms of Lenin’s proposal and affirmed that, strictly speaking, it is the opposite: only when Marx is known well is it possible to understand Hegel’s thought, including his errors.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Wolfgang Maar, ‘O Novo Objeto Do Mundo: Marx, Adorno e a Forma Valor’, *Dois Pontos* 13, no. 1 (April 2016): 29–44, 33.

<sup>48</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 110–12.

Althusser's assertion is quite provocative; it carries within it a certain conception of the history of philosophy. The notion of the "epistemological break" underlies the French philosopher's considerations. With the advent of a conceptual rupture in the history of philosophy, it is only later thought that allows us to correctly see the past moments of knowledge (in the example cited, the relationship between Marx and Hegel). The issue is complex and deserves to be examined in parts. At first, an agreement with Althusser's perspective: there are indeed many moments when the knowledge of a later theory allows visualizing the limits of preceding theories. This was the procedure initially adopted in this chapter: readers who had invested seriously in the Marxian philosophical position would be able to see some limits of Spinoza's or Hegel's positions. In the case of the Dutch philosopher—of greater interest here—how he directly adopts natural causality, for instance, as a foundation of relations among men.

But in my judgment, the notion of epistemological break works better in the field of natural sciences. Not by chance, Gaston Bachelard—by whom Althusser was inspired when invoking the epistemological break—had a solid background in physics and chemistry. Yet in the realm of philosophy and social sciences, some important reservations should be noted. The principal one is that, depending on its use, the concept of epistemological break drains productivity from the previous body of thought, which comes to be seen as an entire misapprehension to be overcome. When this occurs, the perspective of the epistemological break ceases to contribute to advancing research and becomes itself an epistemological obstacle. Hence the benefit of a more nuanced approach to the history of philosophy, one that recovers the complex conceptual stratification proper to its becoming. In fact, I understand that, paradoxically, Althusser did not strictly follow his own indications regarding the position to be adopted toward the history of thought. He managed to maintain an affirmative relationship with Spinoza, an author who, in Althusser's periodization, comes before the epistemological break that had only taken place with Marx in the nineteenth century. And it was a good thing that Althusser did so. For we owe to Spinoza a very consistent affirmation of what is immanent causality, indispensable to the development of contemporary philosophy. Even though Spinoza proposed an overly direct foundation of *modes* (including human beings) in the immanence of substance, he also gave us conceptual advances in the field of ethics and politics, as both have an ontological foundation. It is not possible to separate either ethics or politics from certain general determinations of

the human species; but this is a topic that goes beyond the scope of this chapter.

### MORE ON TELEOLOGY

It was not only with his decisive affirmation of the substantial activity that Spinoza left an indelible mark on the history of philosophy. With the new conceptual elements we now have, let us now return to Spinoza's critique of the finalist vision of the cosmos: when taken in its most productive aspects, it also has effects on Marxism. For if Spinoza gave secondary importance to teleology where it effectively existed (within the scope of the labor process), this does not diminish the greatness of his critique of the presupposition of a finalist cosmos. In a decisive passage of his *Ethics*, he investigates the genesis of teleological thinking: "men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end [...]." <sup>49</sup>

The text goes on to show that men project onto nature the purposes that they themselves pursue in their daily life, constructing a finalist imaginary that meets their needs. Spinoza also tells us that the categories of fabrication improperly invade the approach of other domains of being. Thus, in reference to a built house, we can say that it is perfect or imperfect, in the sense that its construction was concluded or not (as clarified in the preface of Part IV of the *Ethics*). But the same cannot be said in relation to countless other processes that take place in nature, <sup>50</sup> as it is not appropriate for them to use notions of perfection or completeness. If this is so, it cannot be said that a historical process is complete or incomplete, normal or atypical. That is, *we should relinquish a paradigm of existence that is extrinsic to the object itself*. Considerations like this are of greatest relevance to those sectors of Marxism that interpret the becoming of history as if it were moving toward a finality: a style of approach that greatly hinders the understanding of singular historical configurations. There is an irony in the situation: while Hegel had the lucidity to reveal the presence of a final cause throughout a labor process—a presence that

<sup>49</sup> Spinoza, 'Ethics' I, Appendix, 439.

<sup>50</sup> Here, it is important to recall that Spinoza has a broad concept of nature, which incorporates the field of human activity.

had been underestimated by Spinoza—the roles are now reversed. It is Spinoza who now helps us to dismantle the excessive finalism that so often appears in Hegelian texts, as if to indicate how complex the debate between the authors can be.

Although in some moments of his work Hegel refused the more vulgar version of teleology that circulated in his time, the fact is that he also can be found engaging in an open finalism. In his words in the *Encyclopedia*: “The goal of Nature is to kill itself, break the crust of the immediate, sensual, burn itself up like a phoenix, to then emerge from this external appearance rejuvenated as Spirit.”<sup>51</sup> Assuming to have unveiled a purpose in nature as a whole, tacitly coming to be thought of as an anthropomorphic subject, Hegel understands that it has a goal (*Ziel*) to be reached. This was precisely the anthropomorphization rejected by Spinoza more than one hundred years before. Incidentally, it is also seen here that the thesis of the epistemological break—although it has its own productivity—at times simplifies what is a much more nuanced and stratified relation between different moments in the relationship of the thinkers.

A final observation should be made about the possible relationship to be constructed between Marx and Spinoza. If we locate ourselves in the perspective of a hypothetical unconditional Spinoza enthusiast, we could say that Marx’s theory is entirely at the level of modal causality, with modes generating effects on other modes, like parts on parts. Continuing with this argument, Marxism would be seen only as a sectorial knowledge that knows nothing of the substantial activity that, constituting the world, also constitutes each one of us. And, within the complex relation that Spinoza established between substantial activity and modal activity that takes place within it,<sup>52</sup> Marxism is only able to see the latter, lacking a broader ontological perspective. From this perspective, our hypothetical Spinozan would say that his interpretation is confirmed by the fact that Marx’s work acquires increasingly specialized economic characteristics, guided by the debate, for example, on the turnover of capital, the conversion of surplus value into profit, the relationship between the rate of profit and the rate of surplus value, etc.

<sup>51</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Enzyklopädie Der Philosophischen Wissenschaften Im Grundrisse II’, in *Werke*, vol. 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 538.

<sup>52</sup> The classic passage from Spinoza on this topic can be found in Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, I, P. 28, 432–33.

However, it is possible to diverge from this interpretation by recalling the decisive fact that Marxist researchers were faced with the question of how to relate the more specialized aspects of his economic work with the philosophical concerns presented in works such as *Manuscripts of 1844*, *The German Ideology* or the *Grundrisse*. For when we bear in mind the considerations from these texts, we see that Marx's critique of political economy also offers a theory of the relation of human beings with nature and to each other: a broader worldview underlies his critique of political economy. This opens the field of dialogue between Marxism and the legacy of Western philosophy. This dialogue has already been carried out by various significant twentieth-century authors such as Sartre, Lukács, Adorno and Gramsci, to mention just a few, who point to the philosophical dimension existing even in the most specialized moments of Marx's critique of political economy.

### PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE THEORETICAL DEBATE

Throughout the itinerary taken thus far, we have in no way concluded that Spinoza's thought could be absorbed by that of Marx (with the former being understood only as a moment surpassed by the latter). We have arrived at a much more complex and nuanced statement: that the effort at reciprocal interrogation between the two philosophers is a particularly productive task. It is relevant not only to a more solid philosophical formation but also to a correct view of political action. With regard to the topic under debate, I maintain that, with Marx, one learns that the procedure that derives social relations from a natural causality is at least partial, because it comes to naturalize that which has its own emergent logic. On the other hand, those willing to delve into Spinoza's work will clearly perceive our belonging to a non-teleological cosmos that must be assumed in its intensity. For as one advances in the study of Spinoza, it can be seen that behind a vocabulary still marked by seventeenth-century philosophy, he actually speaks of forces in opposition, power against power: substantial activity uninterruptedly unfolding itself without it being possible to define beforehand what will happen. This understanding has both theoretical and practical consequences. As an open

history that is continuously being made, the Spinozan world does not authorize any forecast about a normal path to be followed.

Considerations similar to these render naïve the astonishment—still found today in some segments of the left—in response to certain developments of recent history. Since we reject the supposition of a goal that would give design and shape to the trajectory of human societies, what is to be done at each moment is an analysis of the contradictory powers that manifest within them. A consequence of this is that the emancipatory effort of men and women against various tyrannies becomes a priority, as well as an intensification of the present moment, which comes to be assumed in all its strength. In this regard, it is worth recalling that the Hegelian categories of cunning of reason, or of the march of history, were appropriated in a dubious form throughout the twentieth century, because they began to involuntarily legitimate authoritarian political regimes on the grounds that in the long run a better situation would come. In this, I agree with the defenders of Spinozan Marxism when they assert that it is necessary to obtain and expand the maximum amount of liberty possible, even in adverse real conditions, instead of eternally waiting for an optimal future moment of emancipation. It is clear that this procedure must be combined with an in-depth evaluation of the contradictions of capitalist production and with the best way to reaffirm a substantive emancipatory project.

On the other hand, much less defensible are the excessive expectations for the current consequences of the revival of the Dutch philosopher. Statements such as “returning to Spinoza, politics is possible once again” are frequent in some contemporary circles of scholars of the philosopher. The obvious problem with this expectation is that it comes to assign to a philosopher a task to be realized by men and women of our time. As a hypothesis to be verified, I suggest that the more difficult the conditions became for overcoming capitalism in the final third of the twentieth century, the more some intellectuals came to idealize Spinoza, endorsing even his manifestly problematic statements. This magnificent philosopher came to be considered as an alternative for conceptual investment at a time of growing difficulties for the socialist project. There is no problem with going back in the history of thought in search of a new vitality. In the Marxist camp, Walter Benjamin vigorously pursued this task, which he called brushing history against the grain. But this return must be conducted in a way that does not lose sight of the historicity of a thinker and, even more, of our contemporary historical context.

This is especially true because the focus of the analysis must fall on the historical reality, and not on the thinkers, however brilliant they may be. The difficulties and impasses of the twenty-first century require their own treatment: this is our task, which must be faced with the resources we have. Among them, in addition to the living social forces of the agents, there are also the resources offered by the previously elaborated categorial legacy (and it was precisely this step that this chapter sought to undertake). Spinoza was a brave defender of human power against all forms of tyranny. Therefore, for those who are concerned with finding conceptual instruments to confront the present moment, much better than making an impoverishing choice between Marx and Spinoza (or Hegel), is to work so that these remarkable lines of thought establish communication with the active social forces of the world today.

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PART II

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History and Subjectivity: A Marxist  
Perspective



## “Marxism Is Not a Historicism”: Successes and Limits of an Althusserian Thesis

In 1965, the collective work *Reading Capital (Lire le Capital)* was published in France, featuring articles by Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière, among others. In a Part entitled “The Object of Capital,” under Chapter 5, “Marxism is not a historicism,” Althusser proposed to explicitly differentiate the Marxian approach from what he called historicism. Althusser’s article is particularly relevant because it provides an access route—certainly not the only one—to debate the conception of history in Marx’s writings.

However, given the plurality of contemporary interpretations of historicism, it should be clarified from the outset that—at least for Althusser—historicism is above all a philosophy of history with a Hegelian stamp. In this philosophy, the present is interpreted as a development of an original simple form containing the germ of its subsequent becoming. Teleological par excellence, historicism is alleged to have infiltrated various sectors of Marxism. Althusser claimed that its fundamental error was to conceive

all economic (or any other) history as the development, in the Hegelian sense, of a simple, primitive, original form, e.g., value, immediately present in commodities, and to read *Capital* as a logico-historical deduction of all the economic categories from one original category, the category of value,

or even the category of labour. [...] We should thus be dealing with an essentially Hegelian work.<sup>1</sup>

Althusser continues his argument by recalling that Hegelian historicism affirms the existence of *absolute knowledge*, which is constituted when concepts finally manage to overlap with reality itself. A condition for the possibility of this knowledge would be the peculiar circumstance that the categories of analysis themselves, from a certain historical moment, come to exist “in the state of empirical realities.”<sup>2</sup> To corroborate his reading, Althusser identifies this Hegelian trait in some passages of Marx, citing the Introduction to *Grundrisse* (when it states, for example, that the category *labor in general* exists in the very reality of bourgeois society). We will discuss this last point later. For now, it is important to emphasize that in Althusser’s understanding several other authors fell in with this historicist view—the article specifically takes issue with Antonio Gramsci—which for Althusser would have seriously limited the opportunities to bring Marxism up to date with contemporary times. For this reason, Althusser presents his project of a symptomatic reading (*lecture symptomale*), which would develop from and beyond Marx’s words a structural problematic. In this problematic, the affirmation of the “structure of society, in which all relations coexist simultaneously and support one another”<sup>3</sup> prevails over diachrony and thus constitutes a perspective quite distinct from historicism.

Today, more than fifty years after the publication of Althusser’s text, it is clear that it presents a thematic core that undoubtedly deserves close attention: the crucial importance of differentiating Marxism from a Hegelian historicist approach. One might say that, as a matter of intellectual probity, the acute pertinence of this warning must be recognized. However, at the same time that Althusser formulated this warning, he also left a tacit disjunctive that proved insidious to future research. In brief, this disjunctive suggests that either a predominantly historical analysis is conducted, or a structural analysis, as Althusser proposed. For those

<sup>1</sup> Louis Althusser, ‘The Object of Capital’, in *Reading Capital*, ed. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar (London: Verso, 1997), 125–26.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>3</sup> Althusser especially liked this formulation, which is by Marx himself. It can be found in Karl Marx, ‘The Poverty of Philosophy’, in *MECW*, vol. 6 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 167.

readers who consider this formulation too strong, it is worth considering the philosopher's own words about the importance of the proposed aim of synchrony:

What the synchrony aims at has nothing to do with the *temporal* presence of the object as a *real object*, but on the contrary, concerns a different type of presence, and the presence of a *different object*: not the temporal presence of the concrete object [...], but the presence (or the 'time') *of the object of knowledge of the theoretical analysis itself* [...].<sup>4</sup>

The objective of this chapter is to argue that it is possible to develop an interpretation of Marx that envisions a productive (and not a disjunctive) coexistence between the historical dimension and—to use Althusserian terms—the synchronic dimension of a capitalist society. However, to do so, it will be necessary to carefully specify where the analysis is situated. In other words, although they can be differentiated, historical and systematic (synchronic) theorizations maintain an intimate relation that, in my understanding, the Althusserian thesis failed to formulate in the best way. If this affirmation, so stated, appears more acceptable today, it is nevertheless much more difficult to base it upon Marx's own texts (which present a recognized polysemy that generated very distinct schools of interpretation) and to extract their different consequences, which are not only theoretical but also political.

Indeed, although at first sight the debate about the place occupied by history in Marx's thought may seem purely theoretical—and our first step will be to define exactly what the author understands by *history*—it will soon become apparent that it has consequences with regard to the understanding and action upon the world in which we live. This is because the unilateral emphasis on the past of a given social formation ends up obscuring the understanding of those more contemporary determinations, which present their own logic and demand precise intervention on the level of action. Conversely, a pure and simple sidelining of the historic dimension, in the name of so-called structural or systematic determinations, inadvertently leads its followers to an eternalization of the present moment and, possibly worse, the depletion of opportunities for transformative action.

<sup>4</sup> Althusser, 'The Object of Capital', 107.

However, to properly develop this hypothesis it will first be necessary to pose a question that underlies this entire debate: what, after all, is Marx's conception of history? Because it is not as transparent as it might at first appear, this concept must be sufficiently clarified. This will allow us to address in a subsequent moment the tense interrelationship between synchrony and diachrony—to once again employ the categories used by Althusser—in the Marxian conception of the world.

A final introductory observation: although Althusser's thesis has provided the title for this chapter, it will soon be clear that the French philosopher, strictly speaking, is not the main subject here. More than an appraisal of his work, an effort was made to conduct a *thematic* debate. The main objective is to first clarify the concept of history in Marx and then examine how it is related to the present of a capitalist society. The true aim of this investigation is to make this tense interrelationship clearer.

## MARX'S CONCEPT OF HISTORY

There has been a long debate in the Marxist field to correctly determine Marx's conception of history. In general, specialists on the subject usually focus their attention on two texts. The first is *The Communist Manifesto*, widely known for its emphasis on class struggle as an unavoidable reality of historical processes, with decisive effects also on a society's political structure. "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles"<sup>5</sup> we read in its opening pages. At a higher level of abstraction, the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* also frequently appears in the debate. Rivers of ink have been used to dissect the contradictory interrelations between the material productive forces and the relations of production, presented there as the engine responsible for historical transformations.<sup>6</sup>

Without in any way denying the importance of these two seminal works, another text by Marx and Engels will be examined here that is particularly fruitful for the purposes of this chapter. There is in *The German Ideology* a robust effort to return history to the properly human dimension that constitutes it. Moreover, *The German Ideology* shows its

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in *MECW*, vol. 6 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 482.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', in *MECW*, vol. 29 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 263–64.

authors rejecting, even in their youth, the historical teleology present in Hegelian approaches. Situated at an intermediate level of abstraction between the 1859 *Preface* and the *Manifesto*, *The German Ideology* also provides indispensable elements for the polemic with historicism.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, when explaining their divergences with the neo-Hegelian philosophers, Marx and Engels criticize a certain conception of history as a subject possessing will, a kind of person who might exist alongside others. Differing from such a conception, the mundane character of historical experience is affirmed. In the words of the text:

History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which uses the materials [...], the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances [...].<sup>8</sup>

Rejecting the anthropomorphic view of history (history as “a person ranking with other persons”), Marx and Engels return it to its foundations. History is a temporal concatenation constituted by different generations of human beings, who relate to each other and to nature, creating mechanisms to transform it. The authors were certainly aware of the previous existence of a non-human history (years later, they would respond positively to Darwin’s seminal work, *On the Origin of Species*). However, the natural history that precedes human existence is not the object of Marxian investigation, which focuses on the immense transformations imposed by humans over nature, and which can no longer be apprehended without this decisive intervention.

Having defined human history as the course of different generations over time, in a relationship with nature and also within human groups,

<sup>7</sup> Those familiar with Althusser will note that I am not adhering to his periodization of Marx’s work (supported even in *Essays in Self-criticism*), which claims that there is an epistemological break, separating the young Marx from the mature Marx. Cf. Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London: NLB, 1976), 61–70. Although there are important differences in Marx’s trajectory, I agree in this respect with István Mészáros, who, in contrast to Althusser, maintains that it is possible and necessary to establish an affirmative relationship with the works of the author’s youth. Cf.: István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1986), 217–25.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, in *MECW*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 50.

the fundamental question arises: does there exist in this process, as Hegel supposes, a teleology, understood as an end inscribed within this becoming?<sup>9</sup> Would it be correct to say, even in a broad sense, that the purpose of the prior history is the posterior history?

The Marxian response to this question is a resounding “no,” as demonstrated by the synthesis of the relation between the discovery<sup>10</sup> of America and the French Revolution. Unpacking this example allows us to distinguish at least two distinct levels within the scope of historical causality. In the first, when analyzing the causal processes that led to the outbreak of the French Revolution, it is legitimate to include the discovery of America as one of them. There is a conception of historical process in Marx and Engels that may be approximated to a complex, non-linear causal network that can be known. Note: it can be known, because as Marx does not split the real object from the object of knowledge, the possibility for a science of history is based on a rationality existing in the objective phenomenon itself, and not only on a theoretical construct isolated by the researcher’s mind. Although the real and the theoretical courses are distinct, they are interconnected by the fundamental materialist thesis that the social existence of men determines their consciousness.<sup>11</sup> This conception is undoubtedly different from some contemporary approaches—endowed with great prestige—that conceive history as a set of random fragments, of isolated events that have no internal relationship.

<sup>9</sup> Despite that at certain moments in his work Hegel ironized the naïf teleology that circulated at that time in the philosophical debate, the fact is that he can be caught falling into finalism. Here is one of many examples: “Nature’s goal is to kill itself, break the crust of the immediate, the sensual, to burn itself like a phoenix, to emerge from this external appearance rejuvenated like Spirit.” G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Enzyklopädie Der Philosophischen Wissenschaften Im Grundrisse II’, in *Werke*, vol. 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 538. Assuming to have unveiled a purpose in nature as whole, Hegel understood that it has a goal (*Ziel*) to be achieved.

<sup>10</sup> Marx and Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, 50. The expression “discovery (*Entdeckung*) of America” is used here in accordance with the nineteenth-century terminology present in Marx’s text. Contemporary historiography rightly points out the problematic character of the expression. However, this necessary remark does not compromise the core of the argument in focus here.

<sup>11</sup> In this particular aspect, Althusser made too much of a split between the so-called real object and the object of knowledge, affirming that it would be an “empiricist ideology” to confuse them. Cf. Althusser, ‘The Object of Capital’, 134. I will return to this point later.

By affirming the existence of an intelligible historical process, a decisive proviso is necessary (and this is where we insert the second level referred to earlier, also present in *The German Ideology*). This process is not directed toward a goal; it is constituted only from causal concatenations. But this sober affirmation of a causal concatenation (that operates without a prior scope) did not satisfy the teleological perspective that prevailed in the nineteenth century. That perspective went much further to affirm that there was a hidden purpose. Returning to the aforementioned example, the purpose of the phenomenon of 1492 would have been to foster the outbreak, centuries later, of the French Revolution. Marx and Engels' warning is directed precisely against this teleological error.

In more conceptual terms, it could be said that from a concatenation of efficient causes—the historical process itself—it is not possible to extract a final cause, since the final cause was classically defined by the presence of a subject that poses intentions. *It is precisely this omniscient subject that does not exist in the real historical process*—the succession of generations of human beings in relation to each other and to nature (in the words of *The German Ideology*)—unless the figure of the Hegelian Spirit is invoked, which Marx and Engels understood to be a sophisticated philosophical translation of the Judeo-Christian God.

On the other hand, even though the more general historical process does not have a predetermined objective, it is true that the individual action of every human being (or even of a social class) involves the postulation of ends, since they pursue objectives to be achieved. It is enough to consider the daily experience of human labor—an evidently fundamental category in Marx's thought—to verify the aforementioned postulation. In the well-known example from *Capital*, even the worst architect "builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax."<sup>12</sup> This differentiates our species from other animals, such as spiders or bees, which only operate instinctively. (This is an instructive example, by the way, for those who suppose that Marx's materialism devalues the role of human consciousness.) Indeed, *our species manages to transform natural causality—an ancestral set of processes and transformations without purpose—into a posited causality*, marked by human designs and thus inflected by an ideal representation. This transformation does not occur

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1982), 284.



only within the sphere of the experience of labor. In everyday life, or even in political action, groups of human beings also act to achieve ends, whether linked to economic interests or to the oriented activities of our daily lives. But *it is a mistake to transpose the explanatory categories of the labor process, or of daily human action, to the macro-historical sphere*. In the first case, the activity takes place under the aegis of a causality that is in fact marked by a teleology. By contrast, this does not occur, as we have just seen, in the historical process as a whole.

Would it not be a contradiction, however, to say that men act in pursuit of ends, and that, even so, human history is not teleological? Not at all. It suffices to recall that, in the conception of the founders of Marxism, from the activity of different human groups emerges a reality quite distinct from that intended by its agents. One of Engels' letters to J. Bloch clearly emphasizes the unpredictability of the course of history:

[...] history is made in such a way that the ultimate result is invariably produced by the clash of many individual wills... [...] what each individual wants is obstructed by every other individual and the outcome is something that no one wanted.<sup>13</sup>

Engels' reference to an outcome "that no one wanted" provides the opportunity to differentiate between two categories that are often confused in the debate on Marxism: *chance* and *unpredictability*. From Marx and Engels' perspective, the course of history has evident characteristics of unpredictability; that is, it is a process that, in its conflicting characteristics, escapes the intent of the different agents and social classes involved in it. Even former US President Donald Trump and his political party, to offer a twenty-first-century example, were not able to change the course of US history in the way that they wanted, despite wielding immense causal power. Their forceful attacks against the results of the 2020 elections were ultimately unsuccessful. In this sense, the final results of the elections involved a considerable dose of unpredictability, followed with anticipation by observers and activists all around the world.

But this record of the unpredictability of a historical process should not lead to the conclusion that it occurred by chance: *the categories of chance and unpredictability are distinct*. To continue with the same example,

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Engels, 'Engels to Joseph Bloch, 21–22 September 1890', in *MECW*, vol. 49 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 35.

an investigation of the final period of the Trump administration underscores the manifest dissatisfaction of vast segments of the population with Trump and the Republican Party's economic policies and, perhaps even more so, with their health policies relating to COVID-19. His defeat was not the work of chance; it was the result of a heterogeneous set of causes. Returning to Marx, all his thinking about history consists precisely in demonstrating that there is an internal logic that presides over its unfolding. This is how history can be known; it is not a random set of events. The chapter of this book dedicated to Marx and Darwin will present the hypothesis that this internal logic is only revealed a posteriori of the process (and not a priori), as much as this may disappoint the expectations of those who supposed it was possible to decipher the future in the genesis of phenomena.

This is an appropriate moment to address a criticism often leveled at Marx and Engels: that their conception of history continues to present the marks of a teleology that they themselves rejected.<sup>14</sup> The issue merits examination. Unlike the passage analyzed above from *The German Ideology*, it is possible to locate in Marx and Engels moments where a very strong link between capitalist society and the advent of a future socialist society is affirmed, to the point where the latter can be interpreted as an end of the former.

Let us take, by way of illustration, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Here, when referring to a future communist society, Marx states that "Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution."<sup>15</sup> Now, by affirming that history contains a riddle [*Rätsel*] that will find its solution only at the moment the goal is achieved, that statement comes close to a finalist conception deriving from Hegel. And this is not an argumentative line found only in Marx's youth. We might also cite Chapter XXIV of *Capital*, where, after analyzing the violence present in the process of transition from feudal to capitalist society, Marx presents in the following terms the future advent of a socialist society, which he understands to be very close:

<sup>14</sup> The texts by Raymond Aron are perhaps the best-known and simultaneously the most cartoonish examples of this criticism. Cf.: Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1962), 56.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 103.

This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated [...] capitalist production begets, with the necessity of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation.<sup>16</sup>

By invoking the “necessity of a natural process,” Marx becomes vulnerable to the criticism that understands his conception as a materialist version of Hegel’s philosophy of history (which is manifestly teleological). The possibility of this reading is reinforced in the passage above by the use of the Hegelian concept of “negation of the negation.”

However—and this is the truly decisive point on which more emphasis is necessary—the fact is that in a review of a more extensive set of Marx’s texts, the author himself provides the elements to overcome this finalist interpretation. This occurs mainly in moments when Marx protests against the vulgarization of his thought—he had already declared that “*Tout ce que je sais, c’est que je ne suis pas Marxiste*.”<sup>17</sup> His letter of November 1877 to the editor of the Russian periodical *Otechestvennye Zapiski* is paradigmatic. Marx sharply diverges from the interpretation of his thought made by a columnist of that periodical, who unduly generalized Marx’s hypotheses about the transition from feudal to capitalist society in Eastern Europe, transforming them into a kind of ahistorical prescription. The passage is particularly relevant because it offers additional elements of the Marxian conception of history:

It is absolutely necessary for him [my critic] to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed [...].<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 929 (translation revised according to the German original).

<sup>17</sup> “All I know is that I’m not a Marxist.” Friedrich Engels, ‘Engels to Conrad Schmidt, 05 August, 1890’, in *MECW*, vol. 49 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Letter to Otechestvennye Zapiski’, in *MECW*, vol. 24 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 200.

Marx vigorously rejects "the all-purpose formula of a general historico-philosophical theory whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical." It is difficult to think of a more explicit rejection of teleologism than this, which rectifies the former passages cited. Furthermore, and for the more general purposes of this book, it is important to emphasize that teleological historical perspectives have an affinity with a religious worldview, as the latter carries the promise of a redemption toward which humanity is heading, even if involuntarily. This is an additional reason for Marx to emphasize his distance from any eschatology. However, Marx's warnings about the necessary care when analyzing the different constitutive moments of a historical process were little observed by his followers. A hypothesis that needed to be tested in each concrete case became misinterpreted as a kind of a priori dogma, leading Marx to protest against the trivialization of his thought.

### THE MOST PRODUCTIVE ASPECT OF THE HISTORICAL METHOD

Marx therefore conceives of history as a determinate process that, although it takes place without a prior purpose, can still be known to the point of elaborating a science of history. With regard to a given *present time*, what would be the precise place of historical becoming for its explanation? Could it be that the understanding of our world could, in principle, be derived—as historicism affirms—from its genesis? We have already gathered evidence to infer that Marx's response to this question is also negative. First, however, it is appropriate to specify in which particular context the adoption of a historical method is productive.

At various moments in his work, when analyzing certain already crystallized social relations, Marx adopts the so-called historical or genetic method. In its demystifying and non-teleological form (an essential caveat here), this method allows an unraveling of the genesis of an already consummated socio-historical process, a genesis that became hidden by the finished form finally assumed by phenomena. There are numerous examples of the use of a genetic method in Marx's works, and his approach to the long transition from feudal to bourgeois society is particularly elucidating. We know that it is only at an advanced stage in this process that workers dispossessed of the means of production appear on the scene, placed in opposition to the private owners of the means

of production. For this reason, in a particularly significant passage from *Capital*, we read that:

nature does not produce on the one hand owners of money or commodities, and on the other hand men possessing nothing but their own labour-power. This relation has no basis in natural history [...]. It is clearly the result of a past historical development [...].<sup>19</sup>

The clarifying character of the genetic approach appears clearly stated here: the culminating form of a monetized relationship between owners and non-owners conceals and hides its genesis. Against this mystification, Marx points to the historical origin of this social relationship, reconstructing its different moments. This method is always necessary in the face of those naturalistic approaches that do not question the provenance of what they study. This is why Marx disapproves of the procedures of economists who, not knowing the genesis of the relationships they examine, consider them as analogous to natural phenomena, eternalizing their objects of study (private property, for example, appears as if natural). Given this mistaken naturalism, which persists to this day, the study of genesis demonstrates that behind a crystallized result there is a set of underlying relations produced by a temporal course. Perhaps the synthesis of the productive aspect of Marx's historical method—well known, in fact—is to not consider as nature that which is actually the result of a historical process.

A second example of the affirmative use of this method can be found not only in the transition from feudal to capitalist society, but within capitalist society, as occurs in the Marxian analysis of commodity fetishism. This analysis shows what is behind the production of the fetishized glow of the commodity, revealing the constitutive presence of human labor responsible for this appearance. When we walk through shopping malls today and see, for example, hundreds of pairs of brand-name tennis shoes on top of a small rotating pedestal illuminated by a shaft of light, we see commodities at their peak fetish moment. They *appear* as things disconnected from the social activity—a certain type of labor peculiar to capitalist society—that gave rise to them. Not seen is precisely the anonymous, alienated and poorly paid activity responsible for the appearance of this fetishized glow. In short, these are some examples of the adoption of a

<sup>19</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 273.

historical or genetic procedure in its most productive aspect. Where there is an object that appears as a finished form, Marxian analysis demonstrates its hidden genesis.

### “MARXISM IS NOT A HISTORICISM”

Now that the productivity of the genetic method has been presented—and the precise conditions in which it should be used—the next step will be to point to other configurations where a suitable use of this method is no longer possible. We already know that Althusser denominates this latter feature as *structural* and that he understands this to have been Marx’s most genuine contribution to a critical theory. Also present in Marx’s polemic with economists, one of the clearest examples of this line of thought can be found in the thesis that, to correctly understand bourgeois society, primacy does not belong to the genetic succession of the categories of political economy, but to their internal interrelations culminating in the present moment. The methodological Introduction to *Grundrisse* fully spells out this understanding:

Rent cannot be understood without capital, but capital can be understood without rent. Capital is the economic power that dominates everything in bourgeois society. [...] It would therefore be inexpedient and wrong to present the economic categories successively in the order in which they played the determining role in history [...].<sup>20</sup>

Rent of land, a category historically prior to capital, ends up being subordinated and profoundly altered by the logic of capital. Marx gives indications that, from the emergence of capital as the predominant category, bourgeois society produces what can be called a reversal of its original categories, now consigned to the new reality:

Their order of succession [of the economic categories] is determined rather by their mutual relation in modern bourgeois society, and this is quite the reverse of what appears to be their natural relation or corresponds to the sequence of historical development.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’ (*Grundrisse*), in *MECW*, vol. 28 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 44.

<sup>21</sup> Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’, 44.

For those who see in Marxism a Hegelian philosophy of history, the passage is indeed surprising. It states that to try to understand the current complexity of the bourgeois economy from the historical succession of its categories is not only nonviable but also mistaken. There is a real discontinuity here between the historical genesis and its later form.

*Grundrisse*, one of the preparatory manuscripts for *Capital*, provides additional elements to approach this topic. Perhaps because the text is constructed as a kind of Marxian conceptual laboratory—where he can be found problematizing his own reflections—several points are found that address the method and reveal the process Marx used to create it: “... our method indicates the points at which historical analysis must be introduced [...] To present the laws of the bourgeois economy, it is not necessary therefore to write the real history of the production relations.” The text continues, stating that:

the correct analysis and deduction of these relations as relations which have themselves arisen historically, always leads to primary equations—like e.g. empirical numbers in natural science—which point to a past lying behind this system.<sup>22</sup>

When these considerations are taken seriously, it can be seen that the theory of value developed in *Capital* accompanies, at least in this respect, some of the points of the 1857–1858 manuscripts.<sup>23</sup> For when, in the later text, Marx presents the simple form of value (“ $x$  commodity A =  $y$  commodity B or:  $x$  commodity A is worth  $y$  commodity B”<sup>24</sup>), he is moving on a systematic—or structural—plane where the historical origin of this equation, although relevant, no longer occupies the foreground of the argument. Marx now digs inside those already constituted categories. However, in the course of the analysis of the elementary form of value, historical determinations appear that point to “a past lying behind this system.” The method in this case, without being a genetic method, nevertheless signals to those points where there is a temporal thickness

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 388–89.

<sup>23</sup> But the two texts are certainly not identical: it is known that Marx began *Capital*—differently than *Grundrisse*—with an analysis of commodities, and not money (to mention just one of a number of differences with theoretical consequences).

<sup>24</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 139.

(which permits a historical analysis). A fine example of this is Marx's analysis of the reasons why Aristotle was unable to decipher the "secret of the expression of value." Far from relating to any intellectual deficiency in Aristotle—an idle hypothesis—the reasons should be sought, above all, in the "the historical limitation inherent in the society in which he lived."<sup>25</sup> The slavery prevailing in Ancient Greece, with its inequality between men, was the objective limit that impeded the formulation of the basic category of *labor in general* (which affirms, from a certain point of view, the equality of human labor). Only centuries later Adam Smith, living in an already developed bourgeois society, managed to arrive at this formulation. It can now be seen that it is not necessary to be committed to Hegelianism—unlike what Althusser supposed—to accept that the formulation of categories depends on the historical moment in which a given knowledge takes root. Readers of *Capital* encounter these and other valuable historical considerations that undoubtedly admit a meticulous temporal analysis, even if they do not overcome the immanent logic that comes to preside over contemporary social formation.

For this very reason, the hypothesis supported here is that Marx's considerations on the insufficiency of a purely genetic approach to correctly understand current bourgeois society did not lead him to treat historical research itself as secondary. Moreover, this research should not be considered as a secondary moment in Marx's reflection, and much less as a "historicism." To do so would be to considerably impoverish his conception of the world.

To support this hypothesis, it will now be necessary to address the following question: how is it possible to relate the passages that resort to the historical process as the background explanatory element—it is not nature that produces "owners of money or commodities," as seen earlier—with the other statements, cited just now, that point to the insufficiency of a purely historical explanation? We already know Althusser's response: it is due to a limit of Marx himself, who, still very attached to Hegel, was unable to completely differentiate his own thinking from Hegel's.<sup>26</sup> However, I believe that there are other more productive ways to address this.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>26</sup> Althusser, 'The Object of Capital', 124–26.



It is impossible not to bring to the debate at this point a Marxian text that begins by evoking Hegel (in his so-called dialectic of *positing* and *presupposition*), yet reaches conclusions quite distinct from those of the master of Jena. Once again, *Grundrisse* contains a seminal formulation of the relationship between the historical presuppositions of capital and its posited form, already fully developed. The immediate reference of the passage is the demonstration that, if the first additional capital (“surplus capital I”) obtained by the capitalist can still be related to the previous savings of the capitalist himself, this is no longer the case in later moments of accumulation:

These presuppositions which originally appeared as prerequisites of its becoming [...] now appear as results of its own realisation, reality, as posited by it – *not as conditions of its emergence, but as results of its being*.<sup>27</sup>

A productive relation is found here between the historical presuppositions of capital (its genesis) and its later becoming (the operative structure in the contemporary moment). It is curious to note that, strictly speaking, Marx does not rule out either of the two constitutive poles of this relationship. The text in fact places greater emphasis on the current configuration of this entity-in-process that is capital—there is no doubt about this—but its continuation does not diminish the importance of the history of its formation. Marx shows that *the posited capital is able to produce as a result what was originally its presupposition*. But the configuration that alters and modifies its formative moments is produced from within this more general historical process. Reiterating: although the terminology does evoke Hegel, Marx’s conclusions are in fact distinct. It is the objective real that has primacy, not the externalization of Spirit. Moreover, there isn’t that peculiar Hegelian circularity in what is, after all, an open-ended process formulated by Marx.

Additionally, there is a significant Marxian reference to the fact that the conditions which preceded the creation of surplus capital I “lie behind it as preliminary historical stages of its becoming, just as the processes through which the Earth was transformed from a fluid sea of fire and vapour into its present form, lie beyond its life as finished Earth.”<sup>28</sup> This meaningful reference appears to corroborate the hypothesis of those

<sup>27</sup> Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’, 388.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 388.

authors who affirm that there is an ontology present in Marx's thought: the analysis of the social world is not cut off from its foundations in modified nature itself. Throughout the twentieth century, some Marxist thinkers were sensitive to this point. At the end of his life, Lukács made a comment that engages the concerns raised here:

Marx principally elaborated [...] the thesis according to which the fundamental category of the social being, and this applies to all beings, is that it is historical. In the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx says that there is only one science, that is, history, and even adds: "A non-objective being is a non-being".<sup>29</sup>

From this point of view, it is appropriate to affirm with Lukács that historicity constitutes the fundamental category of all being, its inescapable determination, and should always be emphasized in the analysis of long-term processes. Sustaining this offers an opportunity to recall that the process of evolution of species analyzed by Darwin is a decidedly historical process. Contrary to the biblical cosmology prevailing in the nineteenth century, Darwin demonstrated that species of animals and plants change to the point of becoming unrecognizable over time.

The reference to Darwin is instructive: he gave a history, so to speak, to the natural world (to the chagrin of the "fixists" of his time); in this particular sense, he is an ally of Marxism. Marx himself perceived this clearly; while reading *On the Origin of Species*, he wrote to Engels (on December 19, 1860) that "this is the book which, in the field of natural history, provides the basis for our views."<sup>30</sup> This is a strong observation, for a basis (*Grundlage*) is essential in the work of a thinker. The thesis of the historicity of being was distinguished by authors of the magnitude of Marx and Darwin.

The next step in this chapter was to demonstrate the emergence of social structures that, although not undermining the thesis of the historicity of being, acquire a peculiar operating logic of their own. Thus,

<sup>29</sup> György Lukács, *Pensamento Vivido* (Santo André; Viçosa: Ad hominem; Editora UFV, 1999), 145.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Marx, 'Marx to Engels, 19 November 1860', in *MECW*, vol. 41 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 232. On the other hand, well known are Marx's reservations regarding the transposition—which would have been made by Darwin—of typical categories of a capitalist society to the sphere of natural phenomena.

when a more defined time period in human history is examined, configurations—modes of production, as Marx would say—are encountered that, despite certainly having an undeniable historical origin, are structured according to a peculiar logic specific to their organizing categories. *This logic can no longer be assimilated only to its historical origin.* The previously cited considerations from Marx’s Introduction to *Grundrisse* gain importance here. Using the example of rent of land, Marx warns of the error of trying to explain bourgeois society by simply following the historical sequence of its formative categories.

This last aspect involves a broader issue of conceptual density that should be made explicit. The fact is that the discontinuity between the genesis and its later moments can be detected even in the existing relation between the social being and its more archaic ontological foundation, which can be found in biology. Although this biological foundation is unsurpassable—for instance, as biological beings, obviously we must feed ourselves daily—to stay with this observation alone does little to advance the debate about the specific logic of social relations. For once the latter gains full expression, a distinct level of causality is reached that, despite emerging from biology, is sharply differentiated from it. Chapter 3 of this book, “Toward a theory of emergence: Marx with Spinoza” offers additional considerations on this discontinuity.

In other words, the emerging reality that arose over the course of history acquires irreducible contours that, although undoubtedly owing much to their formative moments, surpasses them and constitutes itself as a bundle of interconnected relations. In the already quoted passage of *The Poverty of Philosophy*—whose importance Althusser correctly noticed—it is now a question of “the structure of society, in which all relations coexist simultaneously and support one another.”

\* \* \*

The tense interrelations between the course of history and the categorical hierarchy in a given social formation can be seen in the expository sequence finally adopted by Marx in the last version of *Capital*. After the long trajectory completed in his various preparatory manuscripts, the chapters in *Capital* alternate between those that are more abstract and those in which Marx adopts a more markedly historical perspective. A dense systematic presentation of the theory of value, Chapter I is an exemplary illustration of the former. Among the chapters presenting a

more historical perspective, we can highlight Chapter X, "The Working Day," a detailed investigation of the advances and setbacks in the struggle of workers for a reduction in working hours. What needs to be emphasized is that the *readers who opt to study just one of these two interconnected lines of argument will be reading another book, not Capital*. They will not be able to see it as an "artistic whole," an expression Marx himself used to designate the book. The risk is either to reduce it to a mainly abstract apprehension of capitalist logic (which would supposedly sustain itself beyond its historical content), or to an exposition of the historical process that does not establish an intrinsic relation with the categorical network that Marx sought to make visible.

*Yet it was precisely this reductive disjunctive that characterized most of the reception to Marx's work.* For example, this is how Norman Levine comments on Gerald Cohen's contribution to the Marxian theory of history: "History played no role in the analysis of the synchronic, logical, structural nature of a totality, and the synchronic, logical structure of a totality told us little or nothing about its temporal development."<sup>31</sup>

Given the analysis offered to this point, there is no doubt that this statement distorts the deepest meaning of Marx's conception: the affirmation of simultaneously distinct but interconnected modes of knowing the same reality. Instead of this dialectical unity, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries we have the "philosophers' Marx," highlighting themes such as those related to the "automatic subject," the presence of Hegel in his work, abstract labor, etc., but barely establishing a dialogue with a supposed "Marx of historians and social scientists." The latter, in turn, was seen to be exclusively concerned with the course of history, with an emphasis on class struggle. On the other hand, in the economist's debate over the theory of value, we could also mention the mistaken tendency to consider value as a true *entelechy*, a logical entity abstracted from the conflict and social violence between classes that indelibly mark it.

Perhaps an excessively Cartesian mentality—combined with the pernicious effects of the division of intellectual labor predominant in universities—leads to supposing that an analysis only advances when disjunctives are established between the phenomena under study. We lose the dialectical character of Marxian thought when proceeding in this way. After

<sup>31</sup> Norman Levine, *Divergent Paths: Hegel in Marxism and Engelsism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 73.

all, Marx does not allow for creating a dichotomy between the categories of analysis and the real substrate that gave rise to them. In this particular aspect, I agree with the observation of José Arthur Giannotti: “Althusser, in his grandiose coherence, radically separates the object of knowledge and the real object, even at the price of undoing all of the other Marxist categories.”<sup>32</sup> Against this radical split, one needs to incorporate the teaching of some passages of the Marxian theory of value that point to the existence of a *real abstraction* operating in the mercantile-capitalist world itself (e.g., in the context of Marx’s analysis of abstract labor). It is worth noting that this existence “has nothing to do with theoretical practice or with the premises of the epistemological tradition of positivism.”<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the category *labor in general* was only able to be elaborated by Adam Smith thanks to a long historical development (and to Smith’s undeniable genius), which found its counterpart in the new categories of political economy. As synthesized in the Introduction to *Grundrisse*, “the most general abstractions arise on the whole only with the most profuse concrete development.”<sup>34</sup> That is, where Althusser sees a Hegelianism to be expunged and proposes a radical split between the categories of thought and the real itself, Marx affirms a peculiar way of founding the former in the latter, that is, a relationship between thought and reality.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The repercussions of the polemic with historicism are not limited to the realm of philosophical debate. It is also possible to identify relevant advances in the social sciences, realized by those who correctly refused a unilateral emphasis only on the historical genesis of a given social formation. In Brazil, the considerations of Florestan Fernandes

<sup>32</sup> José Arthur Giannotti, ‘Contra Althusser’, in *Exercícios de Filosofia (Seleções CEBRAP 2)* (São Paulo: Ed. Brasiliense, 1975), 100.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 93. For a comprehensive discussion of the category of *real abstraction*, I refer the reader to my article: Martins, Maurício Vieira. On Real Objects That Are Not Sensuous: Marx and Abstraction *in Actu*, in *Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory: The Philosophy of Real Abstraction*, ed. Antonio Oliva, Ángel Oliva, and Iván Novara (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 191–202. The article examines Marx’s distance from empiricist conceptions that reduce reality to its sensuous dimension.

<sup>34</sup> Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’, 41.

deserve to be highlighted. A Marxist intellectual quite sensitive to the consequences of this kind of distortion, Fernandes is responsible for a welcome discontinuity in Latin American social sciences. For decades, part of Brazilian sociology debated within a theoretical field that sought in the encounter of the "three sad races" (an ideological formulation designating the Indigenous, the Portuguese and the Africans) what would define the singularity of their social formation. In counterpoint, Fernandes—who had deeply studied Marx's work—showed us the limits of those approaches that were unable to go beyond a very circumscribed representation of a historical and social complexity.<sup>35</sup>

Following some of Fernandes' points, it can be stated that in the debate over the acute contradictions of contemporary Brazilian society, excessive weight is customarily attributed to Brazil's colonial past. It is as if Colonial Brazil had "a very broad back" to which current ills can always be attributed. Undoubtedly, Brazil's colonial past was decisive for the configuration assumed by current Brazilian society and obviously continues to make its presence felt. But a unilateral emphasis on this past winds up obscuring the emergence of new determinations, which correspond to another stage of the historical process and capitalist accumulation, requiring their own analysis. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that those who attribute the contradictions of Brazil and Latin America mainly to the colonial past<sup>36</sup> (also a tendency in some identity movements) have proportionally few considerations to offer about the current relations in which the region and the country are inserted. Insufficient treatment is thus given to issues of the region's position in the international division of labor, the value chains that subordinate all geographical regions and promote violent expropriations from rural and urban workers, the force of international processes of imperialist domination and so on. Moreover, there is no longer any place in the contemporary world that is immune to the logic of capitalist accumulation. Unlike what is assumed by some defenders of a naive ecologism (who seek the truth of our culture in a supposed deep Latin America), even in the most remote corners of the globe, the expanding value chains impose themselves with force, contributing to that omnipresence of capital already detected by Marx.

<sup>35</sup> Florestan Fernandes, *A Revolução Burguesa No Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1976).

<sup>36</sup> As is the case with Jessé Souza, in his book *Como o racismo criou o Brasil* [How racism created Brazil] (Rio de Janeiro: Estação Brasil, 2021).

Returning to Althusser's polemic with historicism, he undoubtedly noticed an important issue that continues to warrant full attention. However, from the point of view supported here, Althusser addressed the issue in a quite partial way, since he was unable to establish a more affirmative relationship between science and philosophy and the real historical process. The presence of some persistent dichotomies in Althusser's argument should also be noted: the real object is radically distinct from the object of knowledge; real history must be radically differentiated from the science of history, etc. Hence the pejorative tone with which he presents what he supposes to be a "collapse" of science into history:

The collapse of science into history here is no more than the index of a theoretical collapse: a collapse that precipitates the theory of history into real history; reduces the (theoretical) object of the science of history to real history; and therefore confuses the object of knowledge with the real object.<sup>37</sup>

In doing so, Althusser ignores some decisive passages from Marx (which I sought to recover and develop in this chapter) in which the latter affirms not a dichotomy, but a *relation* between science and history, between knowable structures and real processes. The Marxian approach invites us to perceive the course of history as a process that, although unpredictable, can be known. Thus, following a path different from that of the structuralism of the twentieth century, and differentiating from a certain disjunctive that this same structuralism bequeathed to us, it can now be affirmed that, in fact, Marxism is not a historicism.

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<sup>37</sup> Althusser, 'The Object of Capital', 133–34.

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## Materialism and Subjectivity: Marx's Position

Niels Bohr brainwashed a whole generation of theorists into thinking that the job was done fifty years ago.

M. Gell-Mann<sup>1</sup>

We often hear renowned philosophers claim that a materialist position has become anachronistic in contemporary philosophy because it does not consider the unavoidable interference of the human subject in grasping and constituting reality. This interference had already been clearly formulated in some crucial moments of modern philosophy (in the thought of Kant, for instance) but received a considerable boost from a certain interpretation of quantum physics, more intensely formulated from the 1920s onward. Summarizing a long debate, prominent physicists had endorsed the position of Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg—Nobel Prize winners in 1922 and 1932, respectively—who declared that they prefer to focus their investigations not on objective reality, but above all on the human subject of knowledge. Heisenberg, for example, asserted

<sup>1</sup> This is the retrospective evaluation of Murray Gell-Mann—winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics of 1969—on Bohr's systematic disqualification of those interpretations of quantum physics that were different than his own. In his exacerbated subjectivism—a mark of our time—Bohr considered to be resolved substantive and philosophical questions that indeed are still open today. Murray Gell-Mann, 'What Are the Building Blocks of Matter?', in *The Nature of the Physical Universe: 1976 Nobel Conference*, ed. Douglas Huff and Omer Prewett (New York: Wiley, 1979), 29.

that the gains of the new Physics should be interpreted primarily in this realm:

for the first time in the course of history modern man on this earth now confronts himself alone. [...] Thus even in science the object of research is no longer nature itself, but man's investigation of nature. Here, again, man confronts himself alone.<sup>2</sup>

But not all physicists agreed with the Copenhagen School's marked anthropocentrism. In response to the radical subjectivism with which his colleagues treated the developments in quantum mechanics, Albert Einstein famously asked Abraham Pais if he "really believed that the moon exists only when I look at it."<sup>3</sup>

Even if we disagree with the philosophical *interpretation* that authors such as Heisenberg and Bohr made of their own work, there is no doubt they were brilliant physicists who left an indelible mark on the history of sciences. In contrast, the vulgarization of some theses of quantum mechanics has reached caricatured extremes in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, reaching cultural sectors far from where the specialized debate initially took place. It can be recalled the 2004 documentary *What the bleep do we know?*,<sup>4</sup> which screened for months in many countries throughout the world, generating websites and in-person and online study groups. In this documentary, a group of prestigious academics (not only from the natural sciences but also from philosophy and psychology) were interviewed about the new paradigms in their scientific work. Among those interviewed, one of them gained greater visibility within those strands of thought that assert a deep unity between science and spirituality. This was the Indian Amit Goswami, PhD in quantum physics. His book *The Self-Aware Universe* also echoes the thesis that the

<sup>2</sup> Werner Heisenberg, *The Physicist's Conception of Nature* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1958), 23–24.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Pais, 'Einstein and the Quantum Theory', *Reviews of Modern Physics* 51 (1979): 863–914, 907. In addition to Einstein, the dissonant voice of Louis de Broglie toward the Copenhagen School's subjectivist interpretation of quantum mechanics should be mentioned. A reconstitution of the debate, as well as a contemporary reevaluation of Einstein and Broglie's positions can be found in Álvaro Balsas and A. Luciano L. Videira, 'Truth by Fiat: The Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics', *Revista Brasileira de História da Ciência* 6, no. 2 (July–December 2013): 248–66.

<sup>4</sup> The film was directed by William Arntz, Betsy Chasse and Mark Vicente.

materialist worldview has become entirely outdated given the conceptual repercussions brought about by quantum physics. In his own words:

During the past four hundred years, we have gradually adopted the belief that science can be built only on the notion that everything is made of matter – of so-called atoms in the void. We have come to accept materialism dogmatically, despite its failure to account for the most familiar experiences of our daily lives.<sup>5</sup>

The subtitle of *The Self-Aware Universe* is: *How Consciousness Creates the Material World*, already indicating Goswami's idealistic perspective. To demonstrate this hypothesis, he conducts an extensive review of distinct moments in the history of thought, giving special attention to some paradoxes that in his understanding would be unsolvable from a materialist perspective. Throughout the book he affirms the absolute centrality of the human subject, interpreted by Goswami as the reason why the universe was created:

If this sounds as if we are re-establishing an anthropocentric view of the universe, so be it. [...] It is time to recognize the archetypal nature of mankind's creation myths (found in the Book of Genesis in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in the Vedas of the Hindu tradition [...]). *The cosmos was created for our sake*. Such myths are compatible with quantum physics, not contradictory.<sup>6</sup>

"The cosmos was created for our sake" says Goswami emphatically, and he is not alone in his radicalized idealism. Several contemporary academics also think this way, and the film *What the bleep do we know?* provides only a small sample of a broader group that strives to declare the bankruptcy of the so-called materialist paradigm. Seen as auspicious news, this failure would open up enormous opportunities for all of us to revive our latent creative potential, according to these authors. In the new physics, also known as the *physics of possibilities*, the reality in which we live is only one among the many possible realities created by our own mind, which would be the true origin of all that we experience. A corollary of this supposition is that whoever wishes to transform the real world must first and foremost transform his own mind.

<sup>5</sup> Amit Goswami, *The Self-Aware Universe: How Consciousness Creates the Material World* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1993), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 141, my emphasis.

\* \* \*

This chapter seeks to respond to these criticisms of materialism, choosing for that purpose some classic works by Marx, who will appear here as one of the representatives of this current of thought. The hypothesis is that there is a place for the subjective dimension in Marx's thought, and this place is of the utmost relevance. At the same time, I will show that Marx formulated this dimension in a very different manner from the aforementioned authors. The task here is to demonstrate where this difference is inscribed. An effort will also be made to show that what is generically called *subjectivity* is a category (which corresponds after all to a reality) that can be better specified, requiring a more precise conceptualization. Thus, it is possible to speak both in terms of human action in the world, a real intervention of human subjects in the dense causal network in which we are immersed, and also to refer to cognitive activity, with the emphasis in this latter case falling on the role of the subject in the act of knowing. In these two aspects, Marx's materialism in no way resembles a unilateral determinism, hence the relevance of grounding the argument briefly summarized here. To do so, it will be necessary to turn to certain texts by Marx, well known to those who study the author, interrogating them from a particular perspective that allows for a response to the criticism already mentioned.<sup>7</sup>

A final observation regarding the scope of this chapter. If physicists like Bohr and Heisenberg are far from being allies to an attempt to productively update a materialist position in philosophy, fortunately, this is not true of some illustrious representatives of psychoanalysis. As is known, in the early twentieth century this discipline was able to develop a consistent theorization (with clinical support) of the genesis and psychic structuring of human subjectivity. Indeed, when Freud presented his successive formulations about the operation of psychic mechanisms, he persuasively demonstrated how a psychic subject is constituted, indicating its division through primary repression, the origin of the unconscious, and the acquisition of language and its network of signifiers. Freud's exposition of the human psyche should be an invitation to philosophers of consciousness

<sup>7</sup> These affirmations do not mean that I endorse the tacit position that Marx's thinking is immune to criticism, which would be a dogmatism to be avoided. However, in the case examined here, the criticism of an alleged Marxian objectivism appears to be misplaced for reasons that will be presented throughout the chapter.

to rectify some of the suppositions nourished throughout the history of thought. Therefore, I find it difficult to believe that there are still neo-Kantians who maintain a philosophy of *free will* even after the impact of the Freudian contribution.<sup>8</sup>

Freud was materialist enough to always note the structuring presence of the *reality* in the constitution of the psychic subject (clearly illustrated in articles such as *The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis*, one example among many). However, to limit the thematic field addressed in this book, the Freudian contribution will not be discussed here. This decision is due to the following assessment, which deserves to be made explicit: I understand that if certain themes related to the constitution of subjectivity should in fact incorporate Freudian theory, this does not mean that it is only possible to speak of subjectivity by turning to Freud and Lacan; it depends on the precise scope of a given investigation. If this statement may seem quite obvious, it is unfortunately necessary today due to the orthodoxy of some contemporary sectors of psychoanalysis that presume that their own presuppositions permit them to phagocytize, as it were, other fields of knowledge. To repeat: the status of subjectivity is a broad topic that involves various approaches. I will mainly be discussing one aspect here: the analysis of the human presence in the transformation of the real world and in its cognitive apprehension, according to Marx's conception. This line is compatible with the contribution of Freudism, while nonetheless maintaining (unlike what took place with the Kantian free will) its conceptual integrity even after the advent of psychoanalysis.

<sup>8</sup> It is surprising that an author such as Jürgen Habermas (activating an only partially modified Kantian matrix) believed he could find in psychoanalytic texts a theorization about a supposed autonomy of the subject Cf.: Jürgen Habermas, 'Desenvolvimento da Moral e Identidade do Eu', in *Para a Reconstrução do Materialismo Histórico* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1983). In fact, what a Freudian work such as *The Ego and the Id* shows us is precisely the impossibility of assuming this autonomy; hence Freud's famous reference to the self as "a poor creature owing service to three masters" (the external world, the super-ego and the id). However, if Habermas at least tries to remain on the grounds of real history, other defenders of an exacerbated subjectivism not only have difficulties recognizing the dependence of the self in relation to the real world, but choose to systematically attack the psychoanalytical contribution, fascinated as they are by the mirage of a nearly complete autonomy of the subject (which Freud himself never recognized).

## HUMAN ACTIVITY IN THE WORLD

Entering now into Marx's thought, two distinct moments of its elaboration will be highlighted, where the different functions of human subjects—and the use of the plural is purposeful—are underlined. The first moment is in the years 1845 and 1846, in Marx's polemic with Ludwig Feuerbach. Until then Marx's relation with Feuerbach was respectful (which can be seen in his correspondence with the author of *The Essence of Christianity*): some elements of Feuerbach's position were used in Marx's first writings, as occurs in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, to enable a critique of Hegel. When Marx finally formulated a more substantive critique of Feuerbach in 1845, it is curious to note that it is related to *Feuerbach's unawareness of subjective human activity*. We read this in the highly condensed *First Thesis on Feuerbach*, one of the texts that has long accompanied Marx researchers on account of its impressive capacity for synthesis:

The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively.<sup>9</sup>

This *Thesis* is surprising because it reveals Marx protesting not only about idealism—his frequent philosophical adversary in his youth—but also about a certain materialism, precisely that which has difficulty recognizing human activity. But it is important to better understand the meaning of this reference to the fact that Feuerbach does not consider the sensuous world *subjectively*. And what does it mean to say that in this materialism that is being criticized, reality is considered “only in the form of the object”? For a better understanding of this difficult and highly condensed First Thesis from *Theses on Feuerbach*, it is worth comparing it with some passages from *The German Ideology*—written in the same period—where we find a more extensive formulation of what was presented synthetically in the *Theses*. Returning to the reasons for his divergence with that philosopher, Marx states:

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, in *MECW*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 3.

He does not see that the sensuous world around him is not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society; and, indeed [...] the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations.<sup>10</sup>

Feuerbachian worldview is partial because it disregards a basic historical process: human activity that produces formal and substantial modifications of reality. The world in which we live cannot be conceived as an original nature: the reason for this singular Feuerbachian blindness is the disregard for the impact of labor processes (whose scope will be developed later on). Even those objects that are presented immediately to our senses require an investigative effort that points to their genesis. This is what happens with the “cherry tree” mentioned by Marx shortly afterward, a plant that was not native to Germany, and that required an action of human commerce to present itself to Feuerbach’s sensuous certainty.

For readers unfamiliar with Marx, the choice of the word *subjective* to designate human activity may seem strange. But *subjective* here is used above all as that which comes from a subject, as distinguished from the already constituted objective world. Marx thus shows us a process of objectivation: what was a latent capacity in the subject is externalized through labor; it thus becomes reality. And it is not an exaggeration to recall that there is movement and interpenetration between the capacities of human subjects and the objective world that comes to incorporate this activity: because when humans modify the world in which they live, they are also modifying themselves, the activity retroacts on the human species itself. This is precisely the process that no longer allows invoking an original nature (objective or subjective) that would be independent from its successive transformations caused by human activity.

If we examine more closely what takes place with the externalization of human activity from the perspective of the subject that triggers it, we see with Marx (in his *Manuscripts of 1844*, a text written a bit earlier) that “The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present.”<sup>11</sup> This means that even our sensory system (vision,

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, in *MECW*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 109.

hearing, taste, etc.) must be exercised in objective relations so that it can develop its latent potentials. It is for this reason that “the most beautiful music has no sense for the unmusical ear”<sup>12</sup> for the latter was not trained to establish an affirmative relationship with a certain type of sonority. To appreciate Beethoven’s late string quartets (my own example), which were very difficult to execute even for professional musicians responsible for their first public performances, intuition alone is not sufficient: one must have an ear for music, hearing that is trained and developed by contact with different sounds. When this does not occur, not only hearing, but all of the other senses remain only in their original form, unfamiliar with the possibilities of a more varied externalization.

However, unlike what takes place in the important *Manuscripts of 1844*, in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels prefer to speak of *men* in the plural, indicating not only a maturing of their own philosophy but also a more explicit divergence from Feuerbach.<sup>13</sup> For the fact is that the latter philosopher used a concept of *man* that tacitly assumed a given human essence. Thus, one who speaks generically of “man” ends up believing in a human nature that remains stable throughout history, whereas the formulation “real historical man” (found in *The German Ideology*, a text that followed the *Manuscripts of 1844*) points to an effort to determine the human subject in a more precise manner. No longer taken as a generality, the human subject can be coherently visualized in the living history of men. Strictly speaking, we cannot accuse the *Manuscripts of 1844* of making the same mistake as Feuerbach. István Mészáros opportunely alerts us to the fact that, behind an apparently essentialist terminology, the behind-the-scenes of the *Manuscripts of 1844* actually points in another direction: in this text, the human essence *changes* throughout history and *is affected* by the objective relations with which it is involved. This ends up imploding the traditional meaning of the category of essence.<sup>14</sup> In any case, there is a terminological oscillation in the text of 1844, and passages that are indeed problematic, that lend themselves to essentialist interpretations that will be more decisively refuted from *The German Ideology* onward.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>13</sup> Today, in the twenty-first century, we would say men *and women*.

<sup>14</sup> István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1986), 12–14. I analyze the *Manuscripts of 1844* in greater detail in the following chapter of this book.



Continuing the debate about essence, it would be possible to affirm that, at least from a biological perspective, the constitution of *homo sapiens* stabilizes at a given moment, allowing the continued reproduction of the species and the millenary transmission of its genetic heritage (which would warrant, albeit in a very broad manner, speaking of a biological human essence). But from the perspective of social and historical relations, Marx's object of analysis, certainly additional and fundamental considerations need to be made. The mature Marx rarely used the category *human nature* in general. One of the few occasions he did so is when he criticized Jeremy Bentham for supposing that the principle of utility is a category that goes beyond the reference to the English citizen of capitalist society to constitute a universal determination (an abusive generalization that, at its extreme, comes to see petty bourgeois in all historical periods<sup>15</sup>). Everything points to the conclusion that for Marx such human nature would be in the space of a *reasonable abstraction* (an expression used in the *Grundrisse*): useful to emphasize what are the common aspects, avoiding unnecessary repetitions, but insufficient to attain the singularity of a given epoch. The analysis progresses precisely when it goes beyond a generality to reach the most singular elements that constitute an entity or historical process. In the given example: How is it possible to compare a nineteenth-century English citizen—and this is certainly not a value judgement—whose contact with the world is saturated by a group of artifacts and a highly developed technological apparatus, with a native of pre-Colombian America, much closer to the processes of interaction with nature and its vital organic cycles? The common substrate that allows a comparison of this type should not prevent us from examining striking historical differences.

Conversely, with the full emergence and blossoming of human activity, the objective world cannot be thought of as “a thing given direct from all eternity,”<sup>16</sup> as it has changed enormously since that externalization. It is true that the planet we live on exists since long before human activity, a decisive and elucidating argument for a clearer formulation of what is the primacy of objectivity, the primacy of the reality that precedes us. Consequently, the process of hominization (the acquisition of an upright posture, bipedalism, the freeing of the hands, triggering

<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1982), 759.

<sup>16</sup> Marx and Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, 39.

of the labor process, acquisition of language, etc.) is obviously *posterior* to the objective forms of material being already found: the planet Earth as a foundational condition of the human species. Although simple, this is an affirmation that subjectivist understandings tend to ignore, given their fascination with asserting the primacy of the human observer in any and all circumstances. That said, it is important to immediately add to what the passage cited from *The German Ideology* clarifies: Feuerbach in Manchester “sees only factories and machines, where a hundred years ago only spinning-wheels and weaving-looms were to be seen.”<sup>17</sup> The continuous externalization of human labor, which profoundly modifies the real world, no longer permitting the belief in an untouched nature.

Returning once more to the qualification of human activity as a subjective attribute, it is worth mentioning that it cannot be found only in the texts of the young Marx. Years later, in one of the preparatory manuscripts for *Capital*, the *Grundrisse*, we also find this qualification. Let’s take the following passage from this text, which clearly registers the interdependence between labor—also formulated here as a subjective activity—and the objects continually appropriated by it:

For if this reproduction appears on one side as the appropriation of the objects by the subjects, it equally appears on the other as the shaping and the subjection of the objects by and to a subjective purpose; the transformation of the objects into results and repositories of *subjective activity*.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, the reference in this passage to a subjective finality sought by the agents gives us the opportunity to address the concept of teleology—an activity aimed at an end—as a singular determination of human subjectivity. It is correct to affirm that human activity is teleologically oriented, because its agents continually present goals to be attained. This is a real discontinuity existing between men and other species. But, to speak of discontinuity is not to suppose that our species escapes the natural order. It only means recognizing the fact that the categories referred to the natural order are no longer sufficient to explain the singularity of the human world. Upon the foundational base of nature new

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’ (*Grundrisse*), in *MECW*, vol. 28 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 413, my emphasis.

relations emerge, specifically social ones, which even without violating natural relations, require their own level of apprehension. This can be understood with the concept of *sublation* (*Aufhebung*), interpreted here as a superseding that conserves, a superseding of the natural that incorporates those previous moments, inserting them in an altered logic. Furthermore, if it is an error to project teleology from the labor process to other spheres of being, or even to the broader course of history (an error committed by Hegel), it is equally mistaken to ignore it where it effectively exists:

Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [*verwirklicht*] his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law [...].<sup>19</sup>

Considerations like these show us a Marx who is attentive to the specific determinations of subjective human activity. His texts vigorously point to the discontinuity existing between human subjects and other species. Teleological action (which presents finalities and opens a distance between our species and the others) is the privilege of human subjects no longer attached to instinctive determination. Obviously, there is no question of an intent to eliminate the constitutive animality of any human, but only to perceive that, upon this foundational base flourish new determinations that require a categorial network that accounts for its singularity (instead of leveling it in the name of the biological basis common to any living being).

It is impossible not to point out here the visible regression that some sectors of the contemporary life sciences are experiencing. By equating the human species too immediately to other species (on the grounds that both are influenced by biological prescriptions), they end up erasing the specific distinction that had already been well delineated by Marx and other earlier philosophers. Thus, when contemporary sociobiology interprets human aggressiveness and violence in continuity with supposedly identical phenomena found in animals such as dogs or monkeys,<sup>20</sup> it is

<sup>19</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 284.

<sup>20</sup> In the words of Edward O. Wilson, one of the founders of sociobiology: "A much more likely circumstance for any given aggressive species, and one that I suspect is true for man, is that the aggressive responses vary according to the situation *in a genetically*

ignoring that this basic aggressive instinct, in the human case, has been captured by the symbolic register and takes place within a dense web of social relations. In this specific example, it is more interesting to note that it is no longer possible to see human aggressiveness as if it were the same as that of other animals, for the simple reason that our instincts (*drives*, as Freud would correctly say, because in the human case the object of satisfaction is no longer fixed) are mediated by relations that only emerge in human interaction. An attempt to explain the wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries based on genetic determinations would be a violent abstraction of an already constituted international market, which has its own contradictory rationality of national and class conflicts, complex relations between economic and political blocks, and so on.

Returning to nature-transforming human activity, Marx is careful to emphasize that it is never carried out individually. Unlike some economists who begin their texts with a reference to a Robinson Crusoe producing on his island, Marx tells us: "Individuals producing in a society [...] is of course the point of departure."<sup>21</sup> This reiterates the importance of social relations that are peculiar to the species, which always intertwine with the process of interaction with nature. In addition to the changes that labor brings about in the natural world (the rising of buildings, the means of production, cities, machines, viaducts, etc.), a new level of objectivity is constituted, emerging precisely through these social relations. It is a *sui generis* objectivity that manifests itself at first in a very simple productive grouping, cultivating nature and developing until it arrives, for instance, at the impersonal functioning of the contemporary banking system (passing through political organizations and the vast field of cultural manifestations). Even if formed by individuals, these configurations present a peculiar objectivity that *precedes* the entrance of each subject into societal interaction, although undoubtedly men and women can act to change it.

The importance of labor as an activity that transforms nature and men should not be understood as a kind of Marxian glorification of the labor activity (Hannah Arendt's misreading in her work *The Human Condition*, which had repercussions in other areas of philosophy). The next chapter

*programmed manner.*" Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The Abridged Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 127, my emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> Marx, 'Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858', 17.

of this book is dedicated to an analysis of the *Manuscripts of 1844*, where I will argue that already in this work by the young Marx, human labor is formulated in its complexity: an activity that is responsible for the process of hominization of the species, and for the flourishing of potentialities that otherwise would remain only latent. But at the same time, labor is also a form of alienation, of estrangement of men and women from their own activity (as much as this may clash with the common sense understanding of the category of labor). This is a complex aspect of Marx's thought that will be developed later; but it must be already said here that it does not involve any type of Stakhanovism (in reference to Alexey Stakhanov, a Soviet worker who was a champion of productivity in the 1930s). It is enough to recall that, in *Capital*, distancing himself from naïve praise of labor productivity (which is ignorant of its own exploitation), Marx writes that "to be a productive worker is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune."<sup>22</sup>

As to the category of teleology, it must be clarified that in no way should it be understood as a kind of motor of history. Because although the acts of a subject (or of a social class) can be teleologically oriented, the fact is that the result of these acts is unpredictable.<sup>23</sup> Marx polemicized with Proudhon in *The poverty of philosophy* precisely because Proudhon endorsed a view of "providential history,"<sup>24</sup> a conception that unduly transposes the teleology existing in singular acts to the broader scope of history (an anthropomorphism to be avoided by any rigorous analysis of social relations).

The combination of the relations of men and women with nature and the emergence of this new social objectivity also establishes well-defined limits for new subjects who enter into societal interaction. This stands out when we investigate the logic that organizes the relations of a capitalist society. Thus, when Marx begins his book *Capital* with commodities, formulating the simple form of value ("x commodity A = y commodity

<sup>22</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 644.

<sup>23</sup> But care is needed: to say that the result of different human acts is unpredictable is not the same as supposing that it is random (or accidental). It only affirms that the particular rationality of the social being *is constituted* throughout history (which, by the way, disallows any type of futurology). Strictly speaking, this rationality can only be better known *post festum*, at the end of a process.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Poverty of Philosophy', in *MECW*, vol. 6 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 173.

B”), and only later analyzes in detail the human labor responsible for its genesis, this is a purposeful approach that expresses the very objectification existing in bourgeois society, which represses the human content needed for the resplendent appearance of the world of commodities. In the daily functioning of the market, the distinctive characteristics of a given seller Peter or buyer Mary are of little importance; they enter the exchange functioning as personifications of economic categories, which shapes the objectification itself of social relations.

*This approach confused those critics of Marx who affirm that there is no space for subjectivity in his writings* (arguing that his work represses the creative potentials of different social agents). In fact, this criticism should be aimed at the functioning of capitalist society, which daily assembles monetary equivalences between subjects and the products of their work, and not at the thinker who made the conceptual record of human subordination to the imperatives of value. In this regard, I agree with Hans-Georg Flickinger’s affirmation that Marx’s analysis can be read against the grain as an emancipatory claim for all those qualitatively diverse human capacities that were subordinated to the quantitative logic of value.<sup>25</sup> The very structure of the exposition of *Capital* authorizes this reading, because Marx opts for an interpenetration between the more theoretical, systematic debate and that of a properly historical nature. This intertwining allows us to see that for impersonal capitalist relations to be constituted, different individualities were (and are) historically sacrificed in terms of that which is most particular to them.

I will now address how another dimension of subjectivity is presented in the Marxian worldview: that referring to an epistemology, or the production of knowledge. Until now we have discussed a subjective intervention that can be called ontological, as it involves a real modification in the existing material being. A consequence of this intervention is the already mentioned emergence of a particular objectivity that profoundly modifies the original physis, as well as the subordination of human subjects to a reality that they themselves created.

<sup>25</sup> Hans-Georg Flickinger, *Marx e Hegel: O Porão de Uma Filosofia Social* (Porto Alegre: L&PM/CNPq, 1986), 169–73.

Following a contribution by Lukács (expressed in the monumental *Ontology of social being*<sup>26</sup>) and to avoid possible errors of interpretation, when I state that subjective human activity, labor, causes ontological modifications in the real objective world, it should be clear that this perspective seeks to overcome the classic problems of traditional ontology. Among these problems, targets of fair criticism from several philosophers, were the supposition of an immutable and ahistorical being, accompanied by the belief in metaphysical essences and a considerably static approach that had difficulties in formulating the dynamic relations that take place in the human world. Steering far from these suppositions (by revealing the radicality of the transformation in existing being that is brought about by human activity), a fruitful incorporation of the concept of ontology has the further merit of clarifying the distinction between this perspective and the *epistemological* one, which will now be addressed.

### HUMAN ACTIVITY IN KNOWLEDGE

It is worth seeing then how Marx conceived questions related to the epistemological sphere, to the formation of knowledge. In fact, there are few passages that address in greater detail the process of formation of concepts in *The German Ideology*. There are indeed problematic passages in this work, where Marx and Engels, in the heat of their polemic with the idealism of the young Hegelians, suggest that if we were able to remove the veil from the misleading representations elaborated by these philosophers, we would have access to a knowledge that would dispense with categories. Thus, in this work we find formulations such as: “These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way” or “every profound philosophical problem is resolved, as will be seen even more clearly later, quite simply into an empirical fact.”<sup>27</sup>

In other words, if the human presence is clearly formulated in the Marxian texts of the 1840s in terms of the constitution of the objective world, in terms of the activity of knowledge (the cognitive and conceptual apprehension that subjects make of their world) some writings from this period are indeed vulnerable to criticism. Since the purpose of

<sup>26</sup> György Lukács, *Para Uma Ontologia do Ser Social*, vol. 2 (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Marx and Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, 31, 39.

this chapter is not to conduct an exegetical discussion of these works, it is sufficient to note that in their complexity, there are variations in the epistemology they convey. Sometimes the latter presents itself within the empiricist limits mentioned (such as the emphasis in *The German Ideology* on an empirical observation that could dispense with concepts), and sometimes it is capable of productive commentary on some extracts of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (in the paragraphs of the *Manuscripts of 1844* dedicated to analyzing this philosopher), where we see a young Marx thematizing the role of categories in the formation of knowledge.

Some years later, in 1857, we find in Marx a more secure epistemological formulation, which, incorporating the conceptual developments of his youth, will bring elements of greater relevance to the debate here. Before entering this debate, it should be noted that with regard to the issues of periodization within Marx's work, I am not using *the notion of an epistemological break* formulated by Althusser (who asserted the existence of a rupture that would oppose the young Marx to the mature Marx<sup>28</sup>). For Althusser, only the mature Marx's production is within the domain of science, with Marx's first phase designated as ideological. Although Althusser's periodization detects an important issue (because real differences in Marx's trajectory do in fact exist), I argue that the treatment given to the issue was unsatisfactory, given that it ended up completely losing important theoretical gains from the young Marx's writings. Authors such as István Mészáros strive to show that when one disqualifies the important category of *Entfremdung* (which can be translated as alienation or estrangement), elaborated already in Marx's first works, much of the scope of the Marxian critique of capitalist sociability is lost. Through this procedure, Marxism is seen primarily as a criticism of inequalities in the distribution of wealth, leaving aside the philosophical depth present in Marx's texts, which point to the deformations suffered by estranged subjects in a world that they themselves created.

But at least one aspect of Althusser's thesis can be accepted: there are indeed differences throughout Marx's works that demand commentary. This is what the celebrated Introduction to *Grundrisse* shows us. This work explicitly formulates the inescapable presence of the subject in the activity of cognition of the world which he seeks to know. At the beginning of section 3 of this difficult text (entitled "The Method of Political

<sup>28</sup> "There is an unequivocal 'epistemological break' in Marx's work [...]." Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005), 33.



Economy”), Marx lays out two methods of approach adopted during the development of political economy as a science. The first method begins with “the living whole” (the population, the nation, the state) and through analysis arrives at abstract relations, such as the division of labor, money and value. The second method begins by appropriating these abstract categories and returning to the population, this time reconstructing it, in Marx’s expression, as “a mental concrete.”<sup>29</sup> The text affirms that the latter method is scientifically correct. When examined in detail the characteristics of this second method, we see that it demands an intense cognitive activity by the subject in the effort to decipher the economic categories that organize bourgeois society. In Marx’s words

[...] the concrete totality regarded as a conceptual totality, as a mental concretum, is in fact a product of thinking, of comprehension; [...] The totality as a conceptual totality seen by the mind is a product of the thinking mind, which assimilates the world in the only way open to it [...].<sup>30</sup>

From this dense passage, it must be stressed the explicit reference to “the totality as a conceptual totality seen by the mind is a product of the thinking mind.” Clearly formulated here is the indelible activity of the subject of knowledge on the objects with which he interacts, elaborating a “conceptual totality.” While the first method practiced in the history of political economy is situated in the domain of empiricism (in its exercise of analytical dismemberment of reality), the second method has characteristics of a conceptual construction throughout. This construction is obviously made with a foundation in reality, but sublates it (in the already mentioned sense of a superseding that does not eliminate, but preserves within itself the surpassed moment). Consequently, the first method is not able to go beyond a “chaotic conception of a whole” whereas the second can access “a rich totality of many determinations and relations.”<sup>31</sup>

*This is why it is a serious misinterpretation to read Marx as an empiricist: his affirmation of the primacy of objective reality should not be confused with a denial of the activity of the subject of knowledge.* Nor should it be seen as a narrowing of the conception of reality that restricts it only to sensuous

<sup>29</sup> Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 37.

objects. It is enough to recall that one of the central categories of Marxian political economy, surplus value, is not recognizable only by means of an inspection of the sensorial world: it cannot be seen, touched, smelled, etc. A categorial apparatus is necessary to accurately apprehend it. What the merely empirical reality presents us is the salary, which can be understood as a sensuous object: a sum of money paid by the capitalist to his workers. But the salary disguises relations that require a more complex theoretical formation to be properly understood. This does not mean that surplus value is a metaphysical object—a criticism made of Marx by some strands of Anglo-Saxon political economy. For while the latter offers its followers a narrow alternative: we either have sensuous objects or we have metaphysical objects, Marxian political economy reaches the understanding that there are real objects and processes that are not sensuous (they cannot be grasped by the senses) and can only be understood through a theoretical and categorial elaboration.

Marx is careful to state in the Introduction to *Grundrisse* that the cognitive act through which the subject appropriates and constructs his own object of knowledge should not be confused with the genesis of the phenomenon itself, which is independent and anterior to the subject who probes the real. This distinction, decisive in a true materialist approach, was confused in Hegel, for whom the movement of categories is also an act of production of the reality:

Hegel accordingly arrived at the illusion that the real was the result of thinking synthesising itself within itself, delving ever deeper into itself and moving by its inner motivation [...]. This is, however, by no means the process by which the concrete itself originates.<sup>32</sup>

The genesis of the concrete (exchange value, in the text example) is certainly prior to scientific activity. Here, the *difference between the ontological position previously analyzed and the epistemological position is quite evident*, because in the first case human subjects intervene in the real world (transforming through labor the natural causality into a posited causality), while in the second case, in the epistemological position, what occurs is a scientific deciphering, the conceptual reproduction of a particular object, but not the production of the object itself. It is certain that the correct deciphering of a given complex reality considerably favors the

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 38.

possibility of transforming it. This was precisely Marx's intention when undertaking an in-depth study of the political economy of a capitalist society with the aim of transforming it. But this should not have us lose sight of the qualitative difference between the ontological and the epistemological positions, otherwise we would fall into the same mistake made by Hegel, the error many contemporary philosophers also make in their overestimation of the role of the subject in the constitution of reality.

For all these reasons, the two different moments of Marx's work briefly delineated here—both his youthful texts and his mature ones—reveal an author quite aware of the subjective presence in the world. Moreover, when the misconceptions of a subjectivist philosophy are corrected, the existence of a precise space for subjectivity is clearly manifest in Marx, whether in ontological terms (when natural causality is transformed into *posited causality*), or in cognitive terms, in the apprehension and interpretation of material reality.

This allows us to overcome a conceptual confusion frequently found in some critics of Marx who claim that he is attached to a “crude objectivism.” In order to overcome this misinterpretation, it must be said that, above all, Marx affirms the primacy of objectivity, understood as the primacy of the conditions of life already given, preceding our entry into mundane interaction. In brief terms, but vigorously underscored by Marx, to be able to conduct politics or philosophy (two among many examples), we must have our basic needs satisfied. Still, this primacy of objectivity should not be confused with an “objectivism,” a position that underestimates and precludes the possibilities for human action, acquiring the characteristics of a closed determinism. Marx asserts for this reason that “circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances.”<sup>33</sup> The problem of the objectivists is that they can only see the first part of the sentence and disregard the singular ability of women and men to interact upon determinations of the world: humans are, in the strong sense of the term, *subjects*, beings capable of performing actions. Needless to say, it was precisely for this reason that Marx invested in the possibility of emancipatory political action, not content with the passive acceptance of the current objective reality. What he rejects, however, is a certain type of political and philosophical voluntarism that, by inflating the importance

<sup>33</sup> Marx and Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, 54.

of subjectivity, assumes that it is enough for humans to desire something intensely for this desire to be realized.

Let us now turn to another decisive passage from the Introduction to *Grundrisse* where Marx reproaches the economists of his time for beginning their books evoking the figure of a Robinson Crusoe producing in isolation on his island. We already know that Marx asserts that any production is realized in a social group, and that it is mistaken to assume that there is a self-determined subject. It is now important to note that the individual perspective is engendered within a society where social relations are highly developed:

It is not until the 18th century, in “bourgeois society”, that the various forms of the social nexus confront the individual as merely a means towards his private ends, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is precisely the epoch of the hitherto most highly developed social [...] relations.<sup>34</sup>

Several contemporary scientists and philosophers highly visible in the media would do well to take these lucid considerations seriously. For if the old mistake of political economists consisted in projecting the perspective of the isolated individual—typical of capitalist society—on all historical epochs, today we see the altered return of this deceptive procedure. In a world that accentuated and radicalized the individualism Marx already detected in the nineteenth century, twenty-first century academics nourish fantasies of exacerbated omnipotence, assuming that the real is organized according to our desires. “The cosmos was created for our sake,” Amit Goswami candidly affirms, unwittingly echoing a culture of radicalized narcissism that continually sends us signs that can be translated as: “if you really want to, you can.” And for those who are not able to realize their desires, there is always the option of attributing the reason for their failure to their personal limitations.

In contrast, in taking a materialist position, the precise recognition of the role of human subjectivity did not lead Marx to ignore the laws that govern mundane life, because on various occasions they operate beyond the desire of social agents. It is impossible not to mention in this regard the careful study conducted by the Romanian philosopher Nicolas Tertulian. Although the immediate reference of the passage is to reestablish

<sup>34</sup> Marx, ‘Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858’, 18.

the importance of the unjustly overlooked Nicolai Hartmann, its basic orientation is quite clarifying in relation to our topic:

Teleological activity, privilege of an active subject, represents only a segment in the infinite becoming of the world. The ontological priority of the category of causality over that of finality seems evident to Hartmann, who undertakes a spectacular operation to rehabilitate the ontological dimension of the category of causality, emphasizing the infinite productivity of objective causal series in confrontation with the finite nature inherent to teleological acts.<sup>35</sup>

The unfolding of objective causal networks—in which our lives are immersed—follows its course, and is only partially altered by the intervention of active subjects who seek to reach their ends (especially when we know that they are subordinated to the imperatives of capital, “self-expanding value,” in the formulation of mature Marx). To clearly visualize the conditions of possibility of this subjective intervention is undoubtedly necessary to maximize its space for action.

Thus, summarizing some points addressed in this chapter (with all the risks that an enumeration of this kind involves), it is possible to find in Marx a philosophical position that affirms that:

1. historical reality precedes the subjects who live in it;
2. humans are the only species that have the ability to modify, within certain limits, natural causality via conscious activity, transforming it into a posited causality. Here, a subjective, human mark is inscribed in this transformation;
3. in the realm of cognition, instead of a simply immediate reading of reality (as some empiricist philosophers suggest), what takes place is a true cognitive construction (a “mental concrete” in Marx’s words);
4. despite this highly important subjective action—which manifests itself in labor and in politics as well as in cognition and language—countless objective causal series maintain their own becoming and are only able to be partially modified by deliberate human intervention. The latter would require correctly deciphering a certain causal network to be able to modify it. An apparently simple observation, it is true, but one that precludes the inflation of subjectivity made by various contemporary philosophers.

<sup>35</sup> Nicolas Tertulian, *Lukács: La Rinascita dell’Ontologia* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1986), 62–63.

There is a relevant place for the subjective dimension in Marx's work, but he also soberly pointed to the limits of this dimension. Unlike a subject that can do anything, Marx situates subjects within a more precise context. Their intervention is more efficient to the degree that they know this context. Therefore, it can be seen that the criticisms that claim that there is no space for subjectivity in Marxian thinking are misplaced: they should be aimed at the system of objective capitalist mercantile relations responsible for the daily repression of the subjective capacities of its agents. Above all, Marx registered and conceptually deciphered this complex mechanism. In a notable metaphor from a text of his youth, we can read that "the actual pressure must be made more pressing by adding to it consciousness of pressure [...] these petrified relations must be forced to dance by singing their own tune to them."<sup>36</sup> Playing capital's offbeat melody is also a way to show its irremediable cacophony. Reading against the grain, Marx's procedure can be seen as a call for a subjectivity that is not mutilated by the alienated limits of the circuits of value. This has a profound emancipatory meaning, which goes beyond a common reading of Marxism as just a demand (certainly a necessary one) for a better distribution of wealth.

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## More on Subjectivity in Marx: A Reading of the *Manuscripts of 1844*

What to do with a text from Marx's youth published only in 1932, years after his death, which became known as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*?<sup>1</sup> The question has sharply divided Marx researchers. More concerned with philosophical and humanist issues, the *Manuscripts* were at first hailed as a reflection of a very different Marx than the one known until then. In an essay from 1932, Herbert Marcuse highly praised the text for placing "the entire theory of 'scientific socialism' on a new footing."<sup>2</sup> But over the course of the twentieth century this assessment changed. The most famous example of this change is the position of L. Althusser<sup>3</sup> and the intellectuals gathered around him who found that the *Manuscripts of 1844* suffered from irremediable problems. They considered it a pre-scientific text, compromised by a bourgeois humanism that had been definitively surpassed in Marx's maturity.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Following some commentators, throughout this chapter the text will be referred to simply as the *Manuscripts of 1844*, or even more briefly, the *Manuscripts*.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Cf.: Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005). In this book, see especially the essay "Marxism and Humanism" (221–47) where Althusser completely discredits Marx's texts before 1845 by qualifying them as ideological.

<sup>4</sup> In this context, the contribution of Marcello Musto should be praised. In a recent publication bringing together several of Marx's writings on alienation, Musto wrote an Introduction that chronicles with extreme competence the reception of the *Manuscripts*



The theme is of interest because as this chapter will attempt to show, the *Manuscripts of 44* offer a particular theorization of the formation of human subjectivity that calls for more detailed commentary. Thus, although Marx approaches in a distinct way in *Capital* the issues that will be raised here, the analysis of the *Manuscripts* continues to be relevant because it more thoroughly presents philosophical themes that are highly condensed in *Capital*. For example, a more extensive argument can be found in the *Manuscripts* about the multiple character of “man’s essential powers” (a category that will be analyzed a bit later), which require various objects to assert themselves. This argument provides an additional philosophical depth to Marx’s critique of the division of labor in manufacturing and in modern industry—as found in chapters XII and XIII of *Capital*—a division that binds each worker to a single activity, impeding the actualization of their various human potentialities. And this is not to mention the existence of some clearly ontological statements found in the *Manuscripts* that encourage a debate about the most suitable way to address them.

### THE 1844 MANUSCRIPTS: NOT ONLY AN ANTHROPOLOGY

In this light, it must be said that if until 1844 Marx’s writings can be qualified as specific interventions on certain themes (as attested by the titles of his works, such as *Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood*, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, *On the Jewish Question*, etc.), the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* presents a larger conceptual scope. An ambitious text covering an extensive group of issues, the *Manuscripts* strive to develop a comprehensive conception of man and the unfolding of history. Whether or not this affirmative, propositional theorization of man is confirmed in later works, if there is continuity or a break in Marx’s thought, I propose to leave this debate provisionally in abeyance. The purpose here is to investigate the productivity of the text in its own terms; in my view, *reified* are those readings that use the identification

*of 1844*. Attentive to the conceptual conquests achieved in the text, Musto nevertheless accurately points to some of its limits. In his words, “to underline the importance of the concept of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* for a better understanding of Marx’s development cannot involve drawing a veil of silence over the huge limits of this youthful text.” Marcello Musto, ‘Alienation Redux: Marxian Perspectives’, in *Karl Marx’s Writings on Alienation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 3–48.

of the limits of the *Manuscripts of 1844* to condemn the text as a whole. Even Althusser himself—who defended the thesis of an epistemological break within Marx’s work—had a positive assessment, for example, of various themes found in Spinoza’s philosophy (a philosopher who lived long before the historical moment in which Althusser located the epistemological break that conferred scientific status to Marx’s subsequent work). Why not adopt this more *nuanced* and productive approximation to an author’s thinking when addressing a text from Marx’s youth?

A reading of the *Manuscripts of 1844* calls attention to the fact that an old philosophical concern permeates the text. Underlying its dense formulations the question can be detected: “What, after all, is man?” For those, who consider it an abusive reading to claim that this issue has repercussions in the *Manuscripts*, it is important to note that the text has clearly affirmative propositions in this regard. For example: “*Man* is directly a *natural being*.” And a bit further on: “But man is not merely a natural being: he is a human natural being,” “Therefore he is a *species being*, and has to confirm and manifest himself as such both in his being and in his knowing.”<sup>5</sup> These are affirmative statements that implicitly accept the supposition that the human subject can be, in some way, the theme of a formulation. The *Manuscripts* develop this issue by conducting a particular synthesis between some conceptual insights that Marx gleaned from Feuerbach with others, quite distinct, from Hegel. The final product is the particularity of Marx’s thought that, although indebted to his sources, is certainly not limited to them. It is a formulation of his own making, bearing a singularity.

Marx tells us that man<sup>6</sup> is activity, a being that surpasses his natural origin and becomes a *conscious* human being throughout history. However, differently than Hegel, the *Manuscripts of 1844* also emphasize

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 154–55.

<sup>6</sup> Accompanying the terminology of the *Manuscripts*, the expression *man* is used here without qualification. In *The German Ideology*, this designation was properly questioned, and Marx will say “real historical man,” in a clear effort to determine a historic singularity. On the other hand, it is an undeniable conquest of the feminist movement to have attained, with complete justice, a broadening of this designation, convoking us to designate historical and real men and *women*. If in this book Marx’s terminology is maintained, it is due to the obvious reason that it is not up to me to change the passages of a text produced in another historical moment. That said, perhaps it would not be excessive to recall that Eleanor Marx, Karl Marx’s daughter, was one of the many female intellectuals and activists who productively allied Marxism to feminism (as opposed to seeing them as conflicting).

the sensuous characteristics of this active being: it is an incarnate man who emerges from the Marxian anthropology of the time, a being who experiences as a necessity the interaction with sensuous and real objects.

But perhaps this is getting ahead of the argument to be developed; in fact, the aforementioned anthropology is inscribed in a much more general perspective that deserves to be explained here. An in-depth reading of the *Manuscripts* reveals that indeed an ontology is being affirmed there. At various moments in the text, the reader will come across propositions formulated at a high level of abstraction and generality, propositions that are intended to refer not only to the human being, but also to being in general.

It is not the intent here to engage in Marxian ontology—a task that would lead far from the topic of analysis—but some observations will be made to offer better access to the status of subjectivity in Marx. With this goal in mind, it will be necessary to alter the expository sequence in the *Manuscripts*: only in a more advanced moment of this chapter will *alienated labor* be addressed, understanding that it is better discerned when inscribed within the broader categorial framework underlying the *Manuscripts*.

### “A NON-OBJECTIVE BEING IS A NON-BEING”<sup>7</sup>

It was György Lukács who pointed to a passage of fundamental importance in the Marxian ontology of 1844, a passage where Marx states that “A non-objective being is a non-being.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, the affirmation is disconcerting when one considers that a large part of the previous philosophical tradition sought to disengage being from the domain of objectivity. For that tradition, the objective, sensorial world would not be

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, in *MECW*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 337. For this particular sentence from the *Manuscripts of 1844*, I have adopted Martin Milligan’s translation, revised by Dirk J. Struik, which I consider closer to the original German passage (*Ein ungegenständliches Wesen ist ein Unwesen*).

<sup>8</sup> At various moments of his work Lukács emphasized the importance of this statement from the *Manuscripts*. His analysis can be found in the *Ontology* that the Hungarian philosopher wrote late in life (in the chapter entitled “Marx’s Basic Ontological Principles”). Cf. György Lukács, *Para Uma Ontologia do Ser Social*, vol. 1 (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2012).

the appropriate place to investigate the characteristics of being. Understood as fleeting appearance, a realm of the transient and the contingent, sensoriality should be surpassed by philosophical interpretation. Only a construction that intentionally sets the purpose of overcoming what everyday experience offers would make possible the ascent to the highest level of being, the primordial task of metaphysics, that modality of speculation whose very etymology conveys an intent to overcome the *physis*.

Nevertheless, Marx tells us, “A non-objective being is a non-being” (“*Ein ungegenständliches Wesen ist ein Unwesen*”), a statement that decisively affirms the ensemble of relations in which all beings are intimately connected. The examples of this configuration range widely, as can be seen here:

The sun is the object of the plant – an indispensable object to it, confirming its life – just as the plant is an object of the sun, being an expression of the life-awakening power of the sun, of the sun’s objective essential power.<sup>9</sup>

Sun and plant, man and nature; beings are immersed in moving relations. Different from those who see in reality only a pulverization, a random fragmentation, Marx points to the foundational relations in which multiple beings are placed. This is why the text emphasizes that “to have object, nature and sense outside oneself”<sup>10</sup> is a fundamental condition for the emergence of any being. It is a set of ontological relations that becomes visible to those who are willing to investigate the connections of alterity in which a being is intertwined.<sup>11</sup> The criticism of those who believe in the possible existence of a non-objective being is developed in this context:

<sup>9</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, 1988, 154.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>11</sup> Readers will observe that the concepts of *being* and *beings* (entities) are used as optional denominations, to be specified according to the context in which they are used. In the twentieth century, Heidegger’s criticism of the equivalence of the two concepts is well known, which he affirmed characterized a “forgetfulness of Being.” G. Lukács, in turn, explicitly polemized with what appeared to him to be an exclusionary dichotomy between *Being* and *entitie* made by Heidegger. The Hungarian philosopher claimed that there is movement and intertwining between beings (entities) and the more general being that constitutes them. Cf. Lukács, *Para Uma Ontologia do Ser Social*, vol. 1, chap. 2.

A being which does not have its nature outside itself is not a natural being, and plays no part in the system of nature. A being which has no object outside itself is not an objective being. [...] A non-objective being is a *non-being*. [...] But a non-objective being is an unreal, non-sensuous thing – a product of mere thought (i.e., of mere imagination) – an abstraction.<sup>12</sup>

To ignore these considerations, to implicitly believe, for instance, that the successive processes of abstraction undertaken by thought can produce real beings, is to engage in a misleading metaphysics that confuses the act of thinking with the genesis of the real world. As can be seen in the last passage quoted, Marx at this point in his work nourished a distrust toward non-sensuous beings, calling them in a somewhat pejorative sense “a product of mere thought.” This leads to the understanding that we are dealing with an ontology that associates the domain of objectivity with that of sensoriality; an objective being is also a sensuous being, manifesting its presence in the real world.

This conception can be accused of still being under the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach, since it ends up relegating non-sensitive beings to the status of non-beings. Years later Marx himself, moreover, will undertake a theoretical construction that makes visible an entity that has no sensory characteristics, surplus value, which can only be determined through a theoretical procedure that, with the assistance of abstractions, compares heterogeneous dimensions. Raising these questions, it becomes clear that there are categorial gains obtained by Marx only in a more advanced period of his trajectory (particularly in the 1850s and 1860s).

Still, at this moment of the analysis, it is perhaps more productive to examine the polemical content of the 1844 formulation. It is a certain concept of *essence* that Marx is interested in questioning. For that ontology that defines a being based on its essence (understood as something of its own, an inalienable determination that pre-exists existence) ends up assuming that it does not need objective relations, that it sustains itself in its essence, hence the characteristics of perennality and atemporality associated with it. And Platonism is not the only target of this criticism; even in the Germany of the nineteenth century it was possible to identify theoretical elaborations that cherished the desire to revere a being

<sup>12</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, 2010, 337.

who exists “only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy”,<sup>13</sup> from Max Stirner’s Unique Individual to the autonomous Self of liberal thought. Here, we have a first indication that already in the Marxian ontology, traits are prefigured that will have repercussions for the understanding of the human subject: the emphasis on his relational character since its genesis, and thus a refusal to consider the subject as a self-contained reality.

This criticism of a determined concept of *essence* requires a terminological clarification, considering that the *Manuscripts* use this category broadly: the text alludes to “human essence,” and to “man’s essential powers,” etc. If, on the one hand, this use creates problems for the claim that the *Manuscripts* convey a critique of an essentialist conception of being, on the other hand, it must be considered that it is always better to determine the meaning of a concept within the argument in which it is inserted (instead of adopting its established meaning a priori). In this regard, it is worth quoting the timely observation of István Mészáros: “Marx categorically rejected the idea of a ‘human essence.’ Yet he kept the term, *transforming its original meaning beyond recognition*.”<sup>14</sup>

This means that in Marx the category *essence* (which in fact appears numerous times in the *Manuscripts*) has a quite different meaning than that formulated by classical philosophy. For what can be said of an essence that transforms itself, or in some cases, *is constituted* throughout history? What can be said of an essence that structurally depends on the objective relations in which it is found<sup>15</sup> (which implies that a modification of these relations entails a modification of its very essence)? What can be said of an essence that has its “nature outside itself”? And these are some of the characteristics of being (or of essence, given that the German word *Wesen* can be translated as being or essence) that the *Manuscripts* present us. As it is not a self-contained reality, being (or essence) is objectified,

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’, in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 236.

<sup>14</sup> István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1986), 13–14, my emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> The expression *ontology of relations* was used by Étienne Balibar (in a book originally published in 1993) to designate the rupture operated by Marx in relation to previous philosophical tradition. Balibar analyzes, for instance, the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach—which defines human essence as the “ensemble of social relations”—emphasizing Marx’s distance from both the individualist and the organicist traditions. Cf. Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Verso, 2007), 121.

externalized in the relations that confirm it. But these relations are not given once and for all. This is a second crucial feature of the ontology of 1844: the world of being, the world of objectivity, is formulated as process, as a flow that incessantly alters its configuration. The fundamental concept of activity (*Tätigkeit*) grasps this transformation, and will now be examined.

### “[...] FOR WHAT IS LIFE BUT ACTIVITY?”

A reading of the *Manuscripts* shows that Marx affirmed activity as the process that characterizes the living being: “for what is life but activity?”<sup>16</sup> Upon examining the objective world, Marx, following a current of thought that certainly has deep roots, emphasizes its processual character of being. Being is flow, activity, incessant transformation that reflects its presuppositions. Its objectivity in no way resembles that of the structure of a crystal: the thing is also process, the ancestral becoming of reality. However, from the emergence of the human species, real and categorial transformations will deeply mark the planet. We are no longer dealing with an original nature; and it is not only the successive transformations it undergoes that are of interest. For this being that experience presents us today and in which we are immersed, this changing set of relations between unequal although interdependent beings long ago distanced itself from what humanity originally considered nature. And in conjunction with the action of natural phenomena themselves, the decisive presence of man intertwined to become a co-author of this distancing.

This is the proper time to enter the Marxian anthropology, having established its necessary relations with the comprehensive ontology. Man is conceived by Marx as a set of capacities, aspirations, needs and perhaps most of all, of “essential powers,”<sup>17</sup> capacities that only develop through interaction with the objects of the sensuous world. “Objects” in the most general sense of the term, in the sense of everything that is outside the self, a definition that encompasses not only *inanimate things*, but also the entire perimeter of reality, including other men and women and nature itself.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, 2010, 275.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, 1988, 109–10.

At first, Marx formulates man as “a part of nature.”<sup>18</sup> But this being posited by nature has the singular ability to interact with and modify nature. This is a particular self-mediation<sup>19</sup>: nature, through man (its product) interacts with itself, undergoing successive modifications. Where there had been only sameness, a difference slowly emerges, a separation between objectivity and subjectivity (subjectivity: what pertains to man and his action, “a characteristic of the subject”,<sup>20</sup> in a precise sense). And man, now a distinct part of original nature, does not stop self-mediating. He simultaneously transforms nature (and is transformed by it), himself and other men and women. The continuous exercise of this first-order mediator activity—which mediates the relation between subject and object—causes radical changes in the “essence” of nature and of man. It is an open history continuously being made.

At a time when epistemological approaches predominate over ontological ones, to speak of the relationship between subject and object may have some resonances that would be out of place here. To clarify: it is not the epistemic subject that is being considered at this moment, nor is it primarily the act of knowledge that is under analysis. The previous statement that *activity* mediates the relationship between subject and object must be understood in its most general sense, which concerns a human subject who, taking nature as the object of his activity, incessantly transforms it. This vital productive mediation also has cognitive repercussions: men acquire knowledge to the extent that they interact with objectivity. But to separate the act of knowledge from the historical situation in which it takes root is a procedure foreign to Marxian ontology and, moreover, criticized by Marx. It is enough to recall a passage in his polemic with Hegel, when Marx affirmed that by over-emphasizing self-consciousness as the fundamental determination of the human, Hegel

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>19</sup> For the concept of *self-mediation*, see the study by István Mészáros: “The relationship of man with nature is ‘self-mediating’ in a twofold sense. First, because it is nature that mediates itself with itself in man. And secondly, because the mediating activity itself is nothing but man’s attribute, located in a specific part of nature. Thus in productive activity, under the first of its dual ontological aspects, nature mediates itself with nature, and, under its second ontological aspect – in virtue of the fact that productive activity is inherently social activity – man mediates himself with man.” Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 82.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law’, in *MECW*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 23.



ends up expropriating him from his bodily and sensory attributes. This creates the conditions to mistakenly believe that the “human essence itself is taken to be only an abstract, thinking essence, conceived merely as self-consciousness.”<sup>21</sup>

Distancing himself from this perspective, Marx assumes the presupposition of corporeality as an inescapable base of human activity. Only through this precondition can we better qualify human activity:

The animal is immediately identical with its life-activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life-activity. Man makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life-activity. [...] Conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity.<sup>22</sup>

It is curious to find that, in the words of Marx, who his critics refer to as a defender of a “reductionist materialism,” the attribute of conscious life-activity distinguishes the incarnated human activity from animal activity. One of the contrasts found throughout the *Manuscripts* is that of the human who surpass that which was only nature (in the broad sense of *Aufhebung*, an overcoming that conserves something of what is being overcome). In this process, the formation of consciousness leaves its unequivocal mark, but it most definitely depends on the subject’s corporeality to develop. Through his interaction with surrounding objects, man acquires consciousness, makes his own activity—and that of other men and women—objects of his action and thought, differentiating himself from them.<sup>23</sup> This is the meaning of the progressive detachment of the human in relation to what originally pertained to him as nature (both external and internal), everything that was received without his intervention and that he, precisely in his condition as an active conscious being, undertakes to change profoundly.

<sup>21</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, 1988, 162.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>23</sup> A relation can be established with Jason Read’s book, *The Politics of Transindividuality*. Building on Gilbert Simondon’s contribution (but enriching it with other approaches), Read demonstrates the relevance of the category of “transindividuality” for grasping the thought of Marx, Spinoza and Hegel. On these thinkers, Read claims that “their attempts to think outside of the binary of individual and collective perhaps can only now be grasped, in light of new vocabularies and shifting languages.” Cf. Jason Read, *The Politics of Transindividuality* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 7.

Let's further define this fundamental concept of activity. We already know that it refers to a first-order mediation between man and nature. We also know that, thanks to the successive updating of this mediator, man passes from the condition of a being given by nature to a being that interacts with it, thus acquiring the characteristics of an active and conscious subject. It is important to note that the constitution of the subject is interlinked with a form of objectivation: all human capacities, all the powers and aptitudes of man are externalized, objectified through his action in the world. This gives rise to what Marx calls "humanized nature,"<sup>24</sup> nature that has undergone man's intervention. If in Manchester there are now "only factories and machines, where a hundred years ago only spinning-wheels and weaving-looms were to be seen"<sup>25</sup> (as Marx notes a few years later in *The German Ideology*), this is due to a tremendous transformation of the sensory world brought about by human activity. It is a simultaneous externalization and realization of human capacities. The process of objectivation triggers a transfer of the subject's power to the real world. It is therefore a modification of exteriority (and we see now that exteriority is not, strictly speaking, an absolute concept because there is movement, interpenetration between what exists in man and what is found in the sensory world), and also a modification of interiority; this is how the human subject is constituted. However, we will see in the next section that this constitution takes place in a particularly problematic way due to the prevailing hegemony of a certain type of activity: estranged labor (*entfremdete Arbeit*).<sup>26</sup>

## ESTRANGED LABOR

The reader may have noted that until now there has been no mention of the concept of labor (*Arbeit*), only of activity (*Tätigkeit*), which is conceived as a progressive form of objectivation. Although in authors

<sup>24</sup> Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', 1988, 108–9.

<sup>25</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'The German Ideology', in *MECW*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 40.

<sup>26</sup> The translation of the German word *Entfremdung* is the subject of endless and irresolvable dispute among scholars. This book alternates between the two most frequent translations: *estrangement* and *alienation*. *Fremd*, in German, means "strange," or "foreign," which reinforces the sense of "not feeling at home" by one who does alienated (or estranged) labor.

after Marx the two concepts are frequently used interchangeably, a careful examination of the *Manuscripts* shows that there is a distinction between them that should be commented on here. It can be said that *activity is a much more inclusive category than labor; it encompasses a broader semantic field*. An ample form of interchange in which the subject interacts with the objective world, activity takes place in the most varied manifestations of human existence. The examples that appear even prosaically in the text attest to its plurality: listening to music is conscious life-activity, as is watching a play, and “seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, being aware, sensing, wanting, acting, loving.”<sup>27</sup>

In its turn, labor is the particular form of activity that is exercised under daily pressure to satisfy continuous human needs; it is related to the species’ struggle to survive. A brief but very enlightening passage of the *Manuscripts* states that “all human activity hitherto has been labor – that is, industry – activity estranged from itself.”<sup>28</sup> The distinction between the two categories is illuminated by linking this statement with another passage that follows shortly after, stating that “*labor is only an expression of human activity within alienation*, of the living of life as the alienating of life.”<sup>29</sup> Labor is understood by Marx (as much as this may clash with the image that was formed later of his thought!) as an activity that also involves an alienation, which occurs when man loses himself, not recognizing himself in its course or its product.<sup>30</sup> We will see later how “conscious life-activity” is the broadest explanatory concept. In its high degree of abstraction and generality, it allows thinking about its particular modalities of objectivation, of which labor is a special one because of its hegemony throughout human history.

It is true that to reach a historical configuration that brings together the precise characteristics of alienated labor that the *Manuscripts* analyze,

<sup>27</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, 1988, 106.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 128, my emphasis.

<sup>30</sup> *The German Ideology* reiterates the understanding of labor as an alienated activity. When Marx and Engels present their political project for a communist revolution, they claim that the latter “is directed against the hitherto existing mode of activity, does away with *labour*, and abolishes the rule of all classes with the classes themselves.” Marx and Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, 52. The social situation envisaged by this project is one where individuals alternate their productive activities and are not restricted to only one of them.

a series of objective presuppositions are necessary, which the text alludes to only briefly (the limits of this early work were already mentioned). But Marx's later writings make clear that in the *Manuscripts of 1844* he is describing the characteristics of the wage labor system, which is the *counterpart* of "self-expanding value," capital itself. The system is characterized by the formation of an expressive majority of the population that, in order to ensure its daily survival, is forced to sell its labor power to the minority class of individuals who own the means of production. Instead of the productive emphasis on use values (objects consumed preferentially within the economic unit itself, as occurred in previous social formations), there is a generalization of the production of exchange values, commodities and goods that must be sold on the market. Labor power itself enters the exchange circuit, becoming an object of negotiation in which it is temporarily sold by its possessor to the owner of the means of production. This is the alienation of labor power (or, simply, alienation of labor, because the *Manuscripts* still do not make the important distinction between *labor* and *labor power*, characteristic of the mature Marx), a process by which human labor enters a circuit that is no longer controlled by the subject who works, who is subordinated to powers beyond his will.

The *Manuscripts* analyze at least four simultaneous levels of alienation or estrangement. First, there is the domination of the product of labor in relation to the worker who produces it. Man comes to be dominated by the objects that he created, well attested by the blinding omnipresence of commodities in bourgeois society, an omnipresence that eclipses the living labor of the workers responsible for their emergence. This is the phenomenon that M. Musto accurately calls *objective alienation*,<sup>31</sup> which is based in the world of production and is determinant for the existence of subjective alienation. Second, man is estranged from his own activity, which is experienced as mortification and as something alien to the person who exercises it. That is, instead of a being who produces himself through the manifestation of his activity—a fundamental hypothesis in Marxian ontology—what occurs is rather the depletion, the impoverishment of the subject who, through a series of historic preconditions, is no longer able to maintain an affirmative relationship with his own activity.

<sup>31</sup> Marcello Musto, 'Alienation Redux', 12. While acknowledging Erich Fromm's advances in the interpretation of the *Manuscripts of 44*, Musto calls attention to the fact that Fromm's emphasis unilaterally falls on subjective alienation, a procedure that ends up compromising the understanding of the objective foundation that determine it.

One of the reasons for the estrangement from activity is the loss of its multiple character. To the degree that man is conceived by Marx as the owner of a differentiated set of “objective essential powers,”<sup>32</sup> each one of these powers (“seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting,” etc.) demands an activity that expresses it. For this reason, *multiplicity* is the attribute—along with the possibility for variation—that provides the best opportunity for the restoration of human action. To effectively appropriate human reality, its condition of multiplicity must be satisfied: “Man appropriates his total essence in a total manner, that is to say, as a whole man.”<sup>33</sup>

Alienated labor is precisely the opposite of all of this: it is characterized by the drastic contraction of an activity that is potentially plural. Under the aegis of the division of labor, each group of individuals, each social class, interacts with a very limited segment of reality. Losing its attributes of multiplicity, labor in bourgeois society is characterized by repetition, by confinement to a stultifying<sup>34</sup> routine that depletes its agents. For this reason, labor is, in the words of the text, the “abstraction from all other being”; where abstraction signifies a real *separation*, because the one who falls into the snares of alienated labor is separated from all other forms of human existence. Pressed by daily needs, men and women are required to abandon countless potentialities for a repetitive, unilateral activity that is separated from the others (abstract, in this sense) and through which they create a world that is hostile to them.

Returning to the levels of estrangement, the third is the one that characterizes the relationship between the worker and the capitalist who commands his activity. This social relation is characterized by domination:

<sup>32</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, 1988, 153.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>34</sup> In this respect, it is worth citing Harry Braverman’s study *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, where the author analyzes the degradation of labor in the contemporary world (and not just in the nineteenth century, a supplementary indication of the contemporary relevance of Marx’s analyses). Braverman—a former factory worker—calls attention to the nearly repulsive character assumed by productive activity for the worker in American society, even in the twentieth century. Among the empirical material presented, let us cite that: “some assembly-line workers are so turned off, managers report with astonishment, that they just walk away in mid-shift and don’t even come back to get their pay for the time they have worked.” Cf.: Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 32.

man's relation to himself only becomes objective and real for him through his relation to the other man. Thus, if the product of his labor, his labor objectified, is for him an alien, hostile powerful object independent of him, then his position towards it is such that someone else is master of this object, someone who is alien, hostile, powerful, and independent of him.<sup>35</sup>

The relation of a man with himself thus also expresses the relations that he maintains with other men. Once again, the notion of an autonomous subject doesn't fit: it is more accurate to discern the intersubjectivity that grounds human relations. Different subjects find their reference not only in their activity but also in other men and women. When they are immersed in estrangement, when they do not recognize themselves either in what they do or in the act of doing, the harsh complement of this alienation is found in the prevailing intersubjective relations. This leads to another level of estrangement, which occurs in relation to the species-being: instead of each man recognizing himself and the other in their mutual belonging to a species, the praise of private life, taken as the main purpose of existence. In the realm of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, of generalized social conflict, the life of the species appears only as a contingent means for the monad-man, a being who gravitates only around his own private interests.

The set of inversions triggered by alienated labor would be this, in short: the product comes to dominate its producer; vital activity, the affirmation of existence, is experienced as its negation; other human beings appear as alien beings and intersubjective relations take place under the sign of estrangement and hostility. Finally, the life of the species comes to be subordinated to individual life. All of this indicates that already in a text from Marx's youth we find a theorization that captures labor in its ambivalence. On the one hand, an activity that incessantly modifies the form of sensorial reality, responsible for the monumental transformation of original nature and also for the objectivation of human capacities, for its manifestation in the act of labor. But at the same time, labor does this under the aegis of estrangement: objectivation takes place in the form of alienation. Human capacities are externalized and appear in light of reality: the development of science provides unequivocal examples of what

<sup>35</sup> Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', 1988, 80.

men can transform in their environment and themselves. But the ambivalent nature of labor, its dialectic contradictoriness, is that through social division, human capacities are realized only for a very limited number of individuals; for the rest of the population they appear as an alien power, which does not even remotely maintain an affirmative connection with their daily work.

Thus, accused by his critics of having “glorified labor,” of naively assuming that it would be possible to reach something similar to a redemption of humanity through the unfolding of the act of labor, precisely Marx, upon better examination of his texts, presents us with a shrewd critique of *Arbeit*, of labor carried out under the pressure of need. What the author values is conscious *activity* (*Tätigkeit*), which allows the expansion of human power and does not renounce interaction with more differentiated segments of reality. Marx’s remonstrances of the partial view of Hegel and the economists are understood in this context:

Hegel’s standpoint is that of modern political economy. He grasps labor as the essence of man – as man’s essence in the act of proving itself: he sees only the positive, not the negative side of labor. Labor is man’s coming-to-be for himself within alienation, or as alienated man.<sup>36</sup>

The distance that Marx establishes with his contemporaries offers an opportunity to clarify the approach adopted in this chapter. A purposeful change was made in the categorical sequence presented in the *Manuscripts*. As is known, the text opens with a debate about certain categories of political economy (such as wages of labor, profit of capital, rent of land, etc.); based on this presentation, Marx also developed a critique of the deformations that these categories produce in men. In turn, this chapter examines the underlying philosophical concepts that guide Marx’s criticism. It begins with an analysis of what is *activity*, a category to which no section of the *Manuscripts* is explicitly dedicated (its decisive importance is only gleaned by a careful scouring of the text), a human externalization that produces its subject. Only after this do we arrive at alienated labor, understood as a degraded modality of human activity. This expository alteration was necessary to show that there are paradigmatic concepts organizing the *Manuscripts*’ argument. If alienated labor can be criticized, this is due to the assumption of the existence of

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 150.

a non-alienated labor, which is the parameter for comparing it with the former. We will not delve into the topic here, but let us at least register the presence of an underlying paradigmatic concept in the 1844 formulation, which will possibly be rectified in Marx's later trajectory, in the direction of a more strictly immanent apprehension of its object. In other words: despite the undeniable achievements of the *Manuscripts*, the text still did not realize the intended immanent criticism *tout court* of political economy. This intention was announced by Marx on various occasions, as in an 1858 letter to F. Lassalle: "The work I am presently concerned with is a *Critique of Economic Categories* or, if you like, a critical exposé of the system of the bourgeois economy. It is at once an exposé and, by the same token, a critique of the system."<sup>37</sup> To combine in a single movement the *exposition* of a system of categories and their *criticism* (without resorting to normative concepts) is a complex procedure, which Marx only achieved in his maturity. But this proviso should not diminish the productivity of the 1844 text.

### THE GENESIS OF SUBJECTIVITY

Let us resume the general trajectory: we began by noting the comprehensive character of the *Manuscripts*, a text that sought to provide a foundation for a materialist conception of man and history. We have also seen that more than an anthropology, there is in the text an ontology, that emphasizes the active, processual character of being, and that therefore differs from classical ontological approaches. The singularity of human activity is due to the fact that it is conscious: man has the ability to ideally represent what he can realize, distancing himself from his original animal nature through activity that is simultaneously corporeal and conscious. The characteristics of this concept of conscious activity were then examined when it became clear its character as an externalization of human capacities that simultaneously modifies the sensuous world and retroacts on its own agent. Finally, *activity* was distinguished from *labor*, with the latter understood as a particular modality of the former, but differs from it because it takes place under the aegis of estrangement.

The issue of the genesis of subjectivity is located precisely within this discussion: only when connected to its ontological foundation can this

<sup>37</sup> Karl Marx, 'Letter to Ferdinand Lassalle, February 22, 1858', in *MECW*, vol. 40 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 270.



genesis be correctly visualized. For the fact is that human labor produces throughout history a detached subject, able to differentiate itself from community ties predominant in older social formations. For this reason, even if the *Manuscripts* criticize Hegel, Marx is concerned with maintaining, in an altered categorial framework, the Hegelian insight that is perhaps most dear to him:

The outstanding thing in Hegel's Phenomenology and its final outcome – that is, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle – is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-genesis of man as a process, [...]; that he thus grasps the essence of labor and comprehends objective man – true, because real man – as the outcome of man's own labor.<sup>38</sup>

The theoretical conquest that Marx valued most in Hegel is the “self-genesis of man as a process.” That is why although the *Manuscripts* explicitly criticize Hegel, it is undeniable that he exercised greater influence on Marx than a superficial reading of the text would indicate. The conception of what is activity (“the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle,” objectivation “as loss of the object”) is influenced by Hegel, as well as the understanding of the processual character of being, its transience. However, while in Hegel intellectual labor realized by consciousness that reflects on its presuppositions is primarily responsible for producing a particularized subjectivity, in Marx it is labor that interacts with real objects and not only with objects of thought. This revival of sensuousness performs a crucial role in the Marxian understanding of the human subject<sup>39</sup>: and this is, I insist, an embodied subject.

<sup>38</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, 1988, 149.

<sup>39</sup> In this reappraisal of sensuousness there is certainly a mark of L. Feuerbach, redirecting the analysis to the field of objectivity and pointing to the earthly origin of thought. However, Feuerbach does this by paying the extremely high cost of mutilating his own understanding of *activity*, and it is precisely this understanding that the *Manuscripts* intend to formulate, conducting an original synthesis between distinct conceptual insights of Hegel and Feuerbach. Later statements by the mature Marx make clear that the influence of Feuerbach on his thinking left few marks, while Hegel remained a lasting interlocutor.

But here, my primary concern is not to identify “what is from Hegel” or “what is from Feuerbach” in this Marx of 1844. It is more productive to recognize the conceptual turn he gave to his sources, generating a new conception with its own characteristics. This issue is raised only to duly record Marx's debt to some thinkers of his time, not to produce the image—which is unfortunately frequent in a certain dogmatic tradition—of an extraterrestrial Marx, announcing a kind of revealed truth. To go deeper into this issue,

This subject has needs, aspirations, desires and requires real objects to produce its individuality; his emergence presupposes that the establishment of his mundane relations is conscious. When this does not occur, what is produced is either the erasure of the subject in his ensemble of social relations (which takes place when the strength of the community is too omnipresent), or its regression to “crude practical need” (in the hegemony of alienated labor), but not its emergence as a conscious agent.

It is in this sense that it can be said that the *Manuscripts* present an analysis of the constitution of subjectivity, of the formation of the specifically human attributes of the subject. But a terminological clarification is in order, given that to speak of the constitution of subjectivity today produces theoretical resonances that are different from those presented here. A twenty-first century discussion of the issue tends to make use of the remarkable contributions of psychoanalysis, notably the notions of desire, the unconscious, repression and others. The consistent psychoanalytical conceptualization of the constitution of the subject shows us a desiring interiority, formed through language and access to the symbolic. For this reason, to speak today about the domain of subjectivity brings us to the functioning of the human psyche.

The concept of subjectivity certainly involves a distinct semantic field in Marx (as it does in Hegel and Feuerbach), and one should not expect nineteenth-century thinkers to address that which they did not intend to discuss (the unconscious, original repression, the signifying chain, etc.). As strange as this may appear, the most basic definition of subjectivity in Marx is that found in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*: “Subjectivity is a characteristic of the subject.”<sup>40</sup> This is an apparent truism, but it is necessary given the tacit Hegelian presumption of a pure subjectivity, which ends up operating beyond its base in real human subjects.

Thus, in its most basic sense, subjectivity as formulated by Marx relates to everything that is located in the human subject (feelings, passions, “man’s essential powers,” etc.), in contrast to the external objective

it is possible to say that “from Hegel to Marx,” it was not only the theoretical field that changed: *the historical reality was different*. In addition to the possibility for a conceptual criticism, living reality acted on the formulation of theory. The *bürgerliche gesellschaft* that Hegel studied at the beginning of the nineteenth century wound up manifesting its most contradictory and explosive contents. In Marxian terms, the value circuit attained higher levels—as well as the class struggle associated to it—enabling explanations that better reflected reality as a contradictory process.

<sup>40</sup> Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law’, 23.

conditions, which precede the entrance of subjects into mundane interaction. Even if it is clear that exteriority and interiority are interpenetrating concepts, it is problematic to simply equate them, which would be far from Marx's understanding. Characteristic of his approach is the emphasis that he attributes to the primacy of objectivity, to the objective conditions of existence which each subject must necessarily face. The assertion of the determination of economy must be understood in this sense, as an uninterrupted pressure that the field of objectivity and of needs exercises on the other spheres of human life. The belief in a possible identity between interiority and exteriority, between subject and object, is a mark of Hegelianism<sup>41</sup> and its ramifications, criticized by Marx, who saw in it an exaggerated exaltation of subjective capacities. Against the idea of a demiurgic subjectivity, its dependence on the object must be attested: only in this way will the different subjects—and this is also true for social classes—be able to recognize themselves in their real historical insertion. Marx makes a sharp remark in *The Holy Family*, in his severe criticism of Franz Szeliga:

In Herr Szeliga we also see a brilliant illustration of how speculation on the one hand apparently freely creates its object a priori out of itself and, on the other hand, precisely because it wishes to get rid by sophistry of the rational and natural dependence on the *object*, falls into the most irrational and unnatural *bondage* to the object, whose most accidental and most individual attributes it is obliged to construe as absolutely necessary and general.<sup>42</sup>

Due to its blindness in relation to its objective bonds, the (alleged) autonomous subjectivity ends up succumbing to precisely what it does not recognize: its determination by the real world. We have already seen that subjectivity in Marx encompasses all “man's essential powers”: these manifold powers include “seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking,” etc. But now it is necessary to add that the formulation of *1844* is not limited to this, because until now it is still on grounds close to that of Feuerbachian sensorialism. What the *Manuscripts of 1844* present that

<sup>41</sup> Even recognizing Hegel's undeniable contributions to a dialectical conception, G. Lukács strongly diverges from the Hegelian thesis of the identical subject-object. Cf. Lukács, *Para Uma Ontologia do Ser Social*, vol. 1, 204–7.

<sup>42</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘The Holy Family’, in *MECW*, vol. 4 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 61.

is new is an argument that reveals that even the domain of subjectivity is unequivocally *active*: far from being originally given to men and women, it is constituted through a complex system of historical mediations:

Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, senses capable of human gratifications, senses confirming themselves as essential powers of man) either cultivated or brought into being. [...] The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present.<sup>43</sup>

It is then a subjectivity that is constituted through history: the most beautiful music, Marx emphasizes, “has no sense for the unmusical ear.”<sup>44</sup> One of the results of this enlargement of the original human faculties is the possibility of forms of interaction and capturing sensuous reality that simply did not exist in other historical periods. The text has many examples that strive to attest to the emergence of a singularized appropriation of the various dimensions of reality. Whether referring to the formation of an aesthetic perspective able to discern the beauty of form, or in the observation that the “starving man” does not know the human form of food (prodded by the pressure from need in its most immediate form),<sup>45</sup> the *Manuscripts* seek to shed light on the historically constituted subject's capacity for enjoyment. What is now known as sensibility (using the word in the sense of an aptitude for the exercise of creative activity) is the result of an extensive chain of simultaneously objective and subjective mediations that are not evident to the unsuspecting observer. The modern subject, who has the capacity to establish an affirmative relationship with a “beautiful music,” this subject who is already detached from “crude practical need” only exists through a historical process that actualizes the potential human attributes. The fact that there can be a regression of these capacities—consider the thesis of Theodor Adorno on the “regression of listening” promoted by the cultural industry—in no way annuls its historical character, but rather confirms it as a constructed dimension.

In the formulation of the *Manuscripts*, the development of subjectivity benefits from a greater field of objective relations in which it can express

<sup>43</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, 1988, 108–9.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 109.

itself. Thus, the becoming of the activity not only transforms the objective world, but also constitutes a new subjectivity, which includes modified human senses. If we started by emphasizing the objectivation character of activity, it is now seen that it also involves a subjectivation, a returning to itself; this is the emergence of a human nature which has nothing left of its original quality, for it is the result of the process that the activity unleashes. Whether in the interaction with music, with a theater play, or even in the taste for food, the subject's field of existence is expanded when, through a successive exteriorization of its essential powers, it is detached from the domain of need and is able to reach the specific enjoyment of *that* object.

Here, the relationship between the subjective capacity and the singular object with which it interacts is manifested, not least because "the sense of an object for me goes only so far as my senses go."<sup>46</sup> This general observation finds its empirical confirmation when Marx recalls that:

To the eye an object comes to be other than it is to the ear, and the object of the eye is another object than the object of the ear. The peculiarity of each essential power is precisely its peculiar essence, and therefore also the peculiar mode of its objectification [...].<sup>47</sup>

We return to the theme of multiplicity, to the understanding of man and woman as a multiple set of essential powers, impulses, desires and particular capacities that demand a non-fixed, polymorphous activity for this plurality to be expressed. Only in this way is it possible to develop an effective interaction between each human sense and the object with which it interacts. If the eye enjoys in a different way than the ear, if touch establishes an object relationship different from that of taste, this is because human subjectivity finds, after all, its necessary counterpart in the field of real objective diversity. Beyond this, subjectivity is pure abstraction, pure creation of those philosophers who believe in the possibility of a disembodied subjectivity, "devoid of eyes, of teeth, of ears, of everything."<sup>48</sup>

Recognition of the potential multiple character of human capacities changes how the conception of human wealth appears, considering that: "The rich human being is simultaneously the human being in need of a

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 165.

totality of human life-activities.”<sup>49</sup> The subject thus needs to externalize himself, to see his different capacities realized.

This exteriorization is felt as a need, as an urgency of the essence that demands its manifestation as existence. Marx defends an affirmative conception of subjectivity, which explains his repulsion for bourgeois society. Instead of providing the conditions for the expansion of being, instead of generating “man in this entire richness of his being,”<sup>50</sup> bourgeois society produces, on the contrary, individuals who are prevented from an externalization of human life. Alienated labor, a degraded form of conscious life-activity, confines the individual to an interaction with a very restricted number of objects. The rigid division of labor mortally stanches the flow of activity; what was the production of life now becomes its atrophy.

Alienated and divided labor finds its corollary in private property. Originally a product of human labor, it ends up constituting itself—due to the alienation of the activity—as a dominating entity, which subjugates the individuals who created it. By selfishly linking the thing to the individual, conditions are given for the emergence of a subjectivity that can only see the interaction with objects under the form of possession, of *having*.

Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it – when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., – in short, when it is *used* by us. [...] In place of all these physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of all these senses – the sense of *having*.<sup>51</sup>

Marx criticizes utilitarian possession for its reduction of human interaction with objects: he sees in this form of possession the amputation of other forms of interaction with reality. Alienated labor, private property and utilitarianism have their most visible representative in the universal prestige of money, an objectified mediator that has the power to buy not only commodities, but also services that represent human capacities. The paradoxical situation is reached in which even an individual particularly lacking in human aptitudes can have access to all of them simply by

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 106–7.

purchasing them: “That which I am unable to do as a man, and of which therefore all my individual essential powers are incapable, I am able to do by means of *money*.”<sup>52</sup> If even the “bad, dishonest, unscrupulous” man can receive the approval of society, this is obviously not due to the development of his subjectivity, but rather to the amount of monetary means that he is able to accumulate. Bourgeois society offers a picture of the general venality of man and what is human, a reduction of human capacities to objects of monetary bargain. While its apologists affirm that it promotes the production of an autonomous subject—as opposed to the relations of personal dependence prevailing in feudal society—Marx points to the narrowness of this conception, which glorifies the distortions in the bourgeois way of life and presents them as human emancipation.

### THE CONTRADICTION OF THE CAPITALIST WORLD

Thus, in the theoretical elaboration of 1844, it is through man’s self-positing in the sensuous world that his subjectivity is constituted. Against the different forms of idealism, which ultimately expropriate the subject from his capacities by seeing in the real world the embodiment of an abstract being (the Idea), Marx will assert that man is always the true producer of himself and his reality. But neither of them, not the human being nor the objective world appears in a definitive form on the stage of history; it is a kind of birthing process that makes its appearance possible:

Neither nature objectively nor nature subjectively is directly given in a form adequate to the human being. And as everything natural has to have its beginning, man too has his act of coming-to-be – history – which, however, is for him a known history, and hence as an act of coming-to-be it is a conscious self-transcending act of coming-to-be. History is the true natural history of man.<sup>53</sup>

Man is simultaneously a natural and human being. Man is natural in the sense of being a part and product of nature; human through active self-mediation that progressively distinguishes him from his original foundation, acquiring particularized characteristics that give a basis to his history. The contradiction of the present era is that the hegemonic form

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 138–39.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 156.

of self-mediation, labor, created the conditions for the constitution of a subjectivity through which its immense potentialities can be glimpsed, but on the other hand simultaneously threaten to submerge at every moment due to the widespread expansion of alienation. Thus, the statement that man is “the outcome of man’s own labor”<sup>54</sup> should be immediately linked to the affirmation that clarifies that this is done in the form of alienated man (and woman), who cannot establish an affirmative relationship with his own activity. The tremendous transformation of nature (embodied in the “ordinary material industry,” an immense set of artifacts, equipment and structures raised by the objectivation of the social power of labor) coexists with human subjects who are in a relationship of estrangement with what they have created. The possibility of constituting a rich and elaborate subjectivity—whose veracity is attested to by the existence of brilliant individualities that act in very restricted segments of society, notably in the sciences and the arts—found its contradictory complement in the degradation of the living conditions of the majority of the population.

Bourgeois society is grasped in its contradictory nature: a historic moment of unprecedented development of the productive capacities of human beings, it is also the scene of a violent expropriation. This duplicity of attributes provides the occasion for Marx to defend his political project: an end to alienated labor and private property, entities interposed between man, his activity and his fellow men. If it is true that the *Manuscripts* still do not have a developed theory of value (a true limitation of the text), this should not prevent us from recognizing its more productive moments, to be incorporated into Marx’s later trajectory. For the critique of private property is not only a criticism of the most visible economic distortions that it produces (its enormous concentration in the hands of a few in stark contrast to the pauperization of the majority of the population), but also involves another dimension of greater relevance. It is the criticism of a form of sociability that prevents men and women from producing themselves as such, limited as they are to an extremely unilateral way of realizing life. Man and woman are potentially a plurality of capacities and essential powers, but the division of labor and private property restrict these capacities and bind each individual to only one of his attributes.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 149.



In the instances when the liberal conception opposes this degrading state of affairs, it consists in presenting the promise of human emancipation through the individual, meritocratic progress of each of its members. Underlying this concept is a narrow notion of individuality, which understands that the value of the latter is to struggle ceaselessly for the possession of money. Human wealth, in this concept, is something that has its counterpart in the amount of money, goods and capital that each individual is able to accumulate.

Marx, meanwhile, prefers to demonstrate that the poverty generated by capitalism can be invested with a new meaning: its negativity can give rise to a profound contestation of that society. Since 1843 the oppressed working class is identified by Marx as the social subject capable of negating and subverting bourgeois rationality. To this assessment, the *Manuscripts* add that expropriation should also be seen as a void from which meaning can be extracted: “Not only wealth, but likewise the poverty of man – given socialism – receives in equal measure a human and therefore social significance. Poverty is the passive bond which causes the human being to experience the need of the greatest wealth – the other human being.”<sup>55</sup>

In conclusion, this chapter has pointed to some of the successes and limits of the *Manuscripts of 1844*. As for the latter, they are several: a knowledge of the categories of political economy that is only incipient; the abundant use of a category such as “man,” which can be accused of conveying an essentialist residue (although the text does offer elements for overcoming this interpretation). Closely linked to the latter characteristic is what György Márkus called a “methodological individualism” present in the *Manuscripts*,<sup>56</sup> that is, the supposition that it is possible to derive the ensemble of social relations from the objectivation of man (the texts of the mature Marx reverse this argumentative path).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 111–12. Margherita Pascucci develops a consistent relation between Spinoza and Marx by exploring the latter’s considerations on the contestatory potential of poverty. Pascucci particularly emphasizes the concept of *dunamei*: a potentiality that has the “power” (*potentia*) to break with a certain established order so as to become real. Cf. Margherita Pascucci, *Potentia of Poverty: Marx Reads Spinoza* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>56</sup> György Márkus, *A Teoria do Conhecimento no Jovem Marx* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1974), 39.

Recognizing these limits, the *Manuscripts* still offer conceptual insights that will prove to be lasting. Marx's critique of unilateral human development in capitalist society continued, decades later, with the publication of *Capital*. Just as an example: readers of the debate in the mature work on the "The Division of Labour and Manufacture" (chapter 14) will find there a fundamental divergence with the deformations manufacture causes in its workers:

It converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity by furthering his particular skill as in a forcing-house, through the suppression of a whole world of productive drives and inclinations, just as in the states of La Plata they butcher a whole beast for the sake of his hide or his tallow.<sup>57</sup>

The philosophical substratum for these harsh words from Marx is precisely his conception of human capacities as being potentially *plural*, requiring a wide range of objects in order to be exercised. A sound knowledge of both the *Manuscripts of 1844* and of *Capital* would offer a better understanding of the extent of Marx's critique of capitalist society. This critique goes beyond the latter's denunciation of the concentration of wealth—which is certainly an aberration to be fought daily—to also include the very foundations of the production of subjectivities in the contemporary world.

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<sup>57</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1982), 481.

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PART III

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Darwin and Marx



## Philosophical Consequences of Darwin's Polemic with Religious Thinking

The situation is worse with Christian philosophy [...]. Each philosopher must demonstrate, facing risk to his work and at times his life, that the dose of immanence that he injects into the world and into the spirit does not compromise the transcendence of a God to which immanence should only be attributed secondarily [...]. At first sight, it is not clear why immanence is so dangerous, but it is. It engulfs sages and gods. The part of immanence, or the part of fire, that is how the philosopher is recognized.<sup>1</sup>

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

It may seem strange to begin a reflection on Darwin's controversy with the religious thinking of his time with a passage from G. Deleuze and F. Guattari about an immanent perspective. However, even though Darwin was not a philosopher, one of the most unique repercussions of his work for philosophical discussion was to solidly establish the debate about the origin and development of the different species of animals and plants from a strictly earthly perspective. The immanent perspective is that in which, for each dose that the philosopher "injects into the world,"<sup>2</sup> one portion of religious power is subtracted. It should also be understood

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 62–63. Translation revised according to the French original.

<sup>2</sup> "[...] *la dose d'immanence qu'il injecte dans le monde,*" in the quoted words of Deleuze and Guattari.

as a conception that adopts the following procedure: natural processes should be explained with a basis in other natural processes, with this perspective having no metaphysical level that guarantees the meaning of the phenomena examined. It is as if we were plunged into the interior of a self-generated cosmos, carrying within itself the motor of its development and of its intelligibility. Darwin was certainly not the first thinker to formulate a perspective such as this; he had illustrious predecessors. The radical way that Spinoza polemicized with the metaphysics of his time in the seventeenth century was mentioned in an earlier chapter of this book. However, when adopted in a study of the phenomena of life and biology, the plane of immanence will bring new and fertile consequences to the field of research specific to this area.

Indeed, the argument Darwin made in *On the Origin of Species* draws attention for its refusal to resort to an explanation of a transcendent character to overcome the difficulties that in fact exist in the new conception about species that he proposed. Given these difficulties (considering the real gaps in the fossil records available until then, for example), Darwin persists in his effort not to invoke divine intervention to explain them, as will be seen further on. Today, more than 150 years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin's efforts point to a safe path: research in paleontology has provided numerous confirmations for that which was only a hypothesis in the nineteenth century.

On the other hand, the fact that there were important gradations within Darwin's position makes more difficult the task of reconstituting the differences between Darwinian thought and the creationist religious perspective against which it engaged. This is a delicate point that must be mentioned in advance. Because the fact is that at an initial moment of his work, reference to a Creator is still an integral part of Darwin's argument, as much as this goes against the later image of the English naturalist that took shape. Thus, if it is true that in *On the Origin of Species* (the classic text of 1859) an opposition to the religious theory of *independent creation* is quite explicit, it is also true that the argument presented still alludes to a certain conception of God. This conception is certainly very distinct from that of creationist doctrine, but nevertheless involved the affirmation of a *first cause* (in the words Darwin himself used in retrospect, years later (in his *Autobiography* of 1876), which influenced the evolution of natural processes.

But to mention this is perhaps to jump too far into the trajectory that will be taken by this chapter. It is important, moreover, to clarify that it

will have the explicit characteristics of a text aimed at a broad public. I took this option based on the understanding that many readers familiar with philosophy and the social sciences do not always have adequate knowledge about the debate in the life sciences. For this reason, the following option was taken here. First, I will present the moment when Darwin became convinced of the existence of profound modifications in species, which would allow questioning some of the dominant theories of the mid-nineteenth century. The emphasis will be on the enormous differences of the Darwinian conception from the creationism of his time, even knowing that, at a more abstract level of the conception of the naturalist, it still allowed approximations with a more sophisticated form of religiosity. In a later moment of the chapter, I will address the aforementioned inflection in Darwin's own thinking (particularly after the 1860s) toward an increasingly secular character that, ultimately, will even dispense with a God conceived of as a first cause. Intimately intertwined with this debate is the role performed by the fundamental concept of *teleology*, which so strongly divided—and still divides—its interpreters. In other words: I accept the hypothesis that the more Darwin moves toward an immanent appreciation of species, the more he dispenses with the marks of a teleological worldview that still influence the text of 1859. The viability of this interpretation (which has been suggested by other scholars in the field) will be demonstrated here.

Having defined this scope, it is appropriate to begin with a significant passage from a letter Darwin wrote to J. D. Hooker in 1844.

### “CONFESSING A MURDER”: THE SPECIES CHANGE

At last gleams of light have come, & I am almost convinced (quite contrary to opinion I started with) that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable.<sup>3</sup>

It can be asked why Darwin used the strong image of “confessing a murder” to qualify his new position about the transformations undergone by species. What would be, after all, the alleged crime committed?

<sup>3</sup> Charles Darwin, ‘Letter to Joseph Dalton Hooker, 11 January 1844’, in *Darwin Correspondence Project* (University of Cambridge, 2021), <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-729.xml>.

Considering the dominant religious mentality of the time (the letter cited was written in January 1844), it is possible to affirm that it involved a kind of parricide. Even if Darwin was not an atheist at this time, he was about to dethrone the ancient biblical account that attributed the origin of species to God, replacing it with an earthly conception. With the consummation of this symbolic parricide, the world of science, and even a part of popular understanding, would never be the same.

Perhaps for us living in the twenty-first century, it is difficult to imagine the omnipresence that various religions had in the nineteenth century. They promoted not only a code of conduct, but also a worldview that explained the place occupied by a wide variety of beings. Christian schools of the time did not say that the Bible was a historical document, which should be interpreted within the social and historical context in which it was written; far from it. The text was accepted literally: for example, the Book of Genesis claimed that God created the world, animals and, above all, man (“in his image and likeness”). The importance that a prestigious religious narrative has within a certain culture cannot be overemphasized. More than a theoretical religious discourse, it was a way to face the constant demands presented by the practical world: moral prescriptions proliferated in the biblical text (the Ten Commandments are only one example). Not only Christianity, but the other monotheistic religions are named very symptomatically by Islam as “religions of the Book,” in reference to the importance that a written text performs in them—beyond the oral tradition—which unites the doctrinaire aspects to be followed. Even today there are many believers who, in a moment of doubt or when debating the correct procedure to be followed, point to a passage of the religious text and say with conviction: “it is written here.”

In relation to the central theme about which Darwin was concerned, the origin of species, scientists of the time also supported themselves on the biblical account to back the theory of special creation. Although this topic is well known by researchers in the life sciences, it is worth briefly presenting here some of the ideas contained in this religious thinking. In short, the theory of special creation claimed that during the process of creation of the world, God created each of the different species of plants and animals separately, and each one of them had a particular essence. Whether a horse, a fish or an almond tree, to use some simple examples, species were seen as autonomous entities, with their own reality. And the human species—the crown of the creation—certainly occupied the top of the hierarchy in this worldview. In the late eighteenth century and during



the nineteenth century, different types of objections arose in relation to the theory of independent creation. New discoveries constantly expanded the fossil records, indicating the existence of beings very different from those found today, but that had disappeared over time. The importance of the work of geologist Charles Lyell in Darwin's education should be highlighted. Lyell had substantively demonstrated that the surface of the Earth was not stable, but subject to a series of transformations related to causes still underway: rain, erosion, volcanoes, snow, etc. Although with regard to species, Lyell remained a "fixist," the fact is that his geological thinking presented a worldview that was much more dynamic than that prevailing at the time and created serious problems for those who dated the history of the Earth to a period of some 6,000 years, based on inferences from the Bible.

The discovery of fossils that simply did not fit within the dating parameters of the time added to the perception that the planet was older than commonly thought. This suggested the presence of some nexus, which until then had not been defined, between the different forms of life. In fact, at least since 1809 the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck had affirmed the thesis of the modification of species, and Darwin himself explicitly gave Lamarck credit for this in the "Historical Sketch" included in later editions of *The Origin of Species*.<sup>4</sup> Yet the relationship between the English naturalist and his French predecessor is marked by ambivalence. Although recognizing the undeniable merit of the Lamarckian affirmation of the transformation of species, in the same letter that served as the epigraph to this section, Darwin mocks him, saying: "Heaven forbid me from Lamarck nonsense of a 'tendency to progression' 'adaptations from the slow willing of animals' &c,—but the conclusions I am led to are not widely different from his—though the means of change are wholly so [...]." <sup>5</sup>

It is a known fact that revolutions in science are rarely the work of a single person. The subject was in the air, so to speak, in the first half of the

<sup>4</sup> Charles Darwin, 'An Historical Sketch of the Progress of Opinion on the Origin of Species, Previously to the Publication of the First Edition of This Work', in *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 6th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xiii–xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Darwin, "Letter to Joseph Dalton Hooker, 11 January 1844." The "means of change" affirmed by Darwin certainly do not refer to a Lamarckian "slow willing of animals," but to the fundamental Darwinian concept of natural selection.

nineteenth century. Proof of this are the studies by Alfred Russel Wallace, which reached conclusions similar to those of Darwin about the transformations of species. Wallace and Darwin jointly presented two articles to the *Linnean Society of London* in 1858, an episode considered the first public exhibition of the new theory to a more specialized public. Corroborating this latent state of the evolutionary theses in Darwin's time is the emblematic reaction of Thomas Huxley upon his first reading of *On the Origin of Species*: "How extremely stupid not to have thought of that!",<sup>6</sup> such was the level of evidence that he found in the argument presented in Darwin's 1859 text.

For some scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Darwin's theory is composed of distinct conceptual nuclei that deserve to be distinguished. Without any pretense to summarize a work of the magnitude of *On the Origin of Species* (which stirs enormous controversies among those who study it), some of its more general aspects can be examined. Perhaps the philosophical premise most fundamental to Darwin's text is the emphatic affirmation that the natural world is continuously changing, and that, consequently, the geological and environmental panorama and that of the living species seen today are profoundly different from those of previous epochs. While this thesis had been formulated long before Darwin, he certainly offered a consistent empirical foundation for its confirmation in greater detail (let's remember the patient collection and analysis of different species conducted on the naturalist's long trip aboard the *Beagle* from 1831 to 1836). This thesis dismantled the fixist model of the biblical order predominant until then. Secondly, *On the Origin of Species* contains the idea that it is possible to establish a series of causal links between the currently found species and their antecessors: they are in fact correlated, and this is due to their descentance from a common ancestor. A third relevant line of the theory—and this was a supreme insult to the prevailing common sense—is the affirmation that the human species also has an animal origin; that is, it is not outside the natural order, because it is linked to it through evolution.<sup>7</sup> Strictly speaking, this aspect would only be developed in detail in a later work by Darwin, *The Descent*

<sup>6</sup> Francis Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, Including an Autobiographical Chapter*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1887), 197.

<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of his work, Darwin refers to *descent with modification*. The word *evolution*, in relation to species, only became stabilized after 1859, notably after the sixth edition of *The Origin of Species*.

of *Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, published in 1871,<sup>8</sup> but even the text of 1859 provides elements that allow including man in the process of evolution. Finally, another important element was the finding that the processes that command the development of species are not of a supernatural order,<sup>9</sup> but are determined by a complex concatenation of earthly causes and effects. These regularities are highlighted by the fundamental concept of *natural selection*, which is a unique Darwinian contribution.

To understand natural selection, Darwin focused his attention on small differences within the offspring of each species. Although nearly imperceptible to untrained eyes, these differences (like the shape of the beak of a pigeon or the length of a part of an organism) would influence the ability of this organism to survive. At this moment in *The Origin of Species* enters the emphatic registration that due to the scarcity of available natural resources, any given species has more offspring than can survive: "Hence, as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life."<sup>10</sup>

This combines with the decisive fact that the environment in which these species live is susceptible to changes even in the space of a single generation: routine climatic changes greatly influence, for example, the quantity of food available. Prolonged periods of drought, or to the contrary, floods that make living conditions more difficult, or even excessive cold; these are all factors that exercise considerable effects on the survival capacity of the representatives of a given biota. The fact is that these small differences among the offspring of a species decisively influence which individuals have greater chances of surviving: "I have called this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term Natural Selection, in order to mark its relation to man's power of selection."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> It is fitting to recall that even creationists of the twenty-first century continue to invoke the flood of Noah in their texts. This is the case of the mathematician William Dembski, in his book *The End of Christianity*.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 6th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 50.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 49.

The reference to “man’s power of selection” occurs because Darwin had previously emphasized that breeders of animals and cultivators of plants *select* the characteristics that they want to see reproduced or expanded in a certain offspring (a look at current domestic animals is enough to reveal the enormous difference between them and their antecessors). This is why Darwin makes an analogy between this selection made by humans with that made by nature, through which only the most fit individuals are able to survive. In a later section of this chapter (which discusses if Darwin was able to completely free himself from the old concept of teleology, an activity commanded by an end), I will address in greater detail some of the unintended consequences of this analogy of human procedures with natural processes, an analogy that until today is discussed among specialists. For now, it should be emphasized that the principle of natural selection causes, over a long period of time, the fittest descendants to have substantial modifications from the oldest original species.

In this regard, the title of the article that Alfred Russel Wallace sent to Darwin in 1858 is quite suggestive: *On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type*.<sup>12</sup> This title even reveals another possible understanding of the concept of *transmutation* (or evolution, as will be used later) because it does not need to be seen an evaluative or ascending sense. Although at some moments both Darwin and Wallace appear to still maintain that sense, strictly speaking, in its more original and productive dimensions, this “to Depart Indefinitely” *deserves to be interpreted as a drift that does not include any pre-determined end*. This is because the process of natural selection involves two distinct moments: initially, the random variation that can be verified in offspring, and soon after the survival of the fittest, whose descendants would inherit—independently from its use or disuse—that difference that allowed it to survive. It is an open history that is then in the making. Although at this time Darwin did not reject Lamarck’s famous notion that variations in the use of a certain organ are transmitted to the descendants—as the French naturalist supposed to have taken place with the giraffe’s neck—the concept of natural selection is not based on this mistaken supposition

<sup>12</sup> As is known, it was only when Darwin received Wallace’s text—which presented an argument analogous to his own—that he decided to publish what became his magnum opus. It should be properly registered here the importance of Wallace’s contribution to the theory that is usually associated, perhaps with a bias, only with Darwin’s name.

by Lamarck. The latter would remain only as a subordinated moment in the Darwinian argument, later rectified by A. Weismann, without compromising the central core of the new theory.

It is in this context that the other aspect of evolutionary thought mentioned is understood: the affirmation that current species descend from a primordial form, a common ancestor that over thousands of generations was slowly branching off to reach the exuberant plurality of species that we see today: "we must likewise admit that all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth may be descended from some one primordial form."<sup>13</sup>

The assertion of the existence of a common ancestor, in turn, explains why at various moments in his work Darwin suggests that we not attribute excessive importance to the criteria that specify a certain species, because "species are only well-marked varieties."<sup>14</sup> Instead of a reasoning that would attribute a singular essence to each species (given that they had been created one by one by God), Darwin prefers to distance himself from this exclusionary division, because at its foundation it pays tribute to an essentialist thinking, which is exactly what is being criticized in *On the Origin of Species*. Thus, instead of being conceived as disconnected beings, what is important are the relations that exist among the different beings. Indeed, a new vision of the world is reached in this way.

Only this way can the analogies of the functions performed by the distinct parts of different animals be understood, analogies that until today still surprise those who research their origin. For they will find: "The similar framework of bones in the hand of a man, wing of a bat, fin of the porpoise, and leg of the horse,"<sup>15</sup> as if to indicate the identity of the original form from which they were progressively distancing themselves. At the same time, this new vision of the connections between species shows that the old classificatory system proposed by Linnaeus must be replaced by another that would allow correct understanding of their origin. "Our classifications will come to be, as far as they can be so made, genealogies,"<sup>16</sup> Darwin affirms in a particularly fruitful moment of his text, holding consequences that are not only methodological but

<sup>13</sup> Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 425.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 420.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 427.

also philosophical. And if necessary, this renewed genealogy will group together that which is now separated, and, inversely, could separate what is currently joined, taking a path opposite to that of popular understanding (which is only focused on the apparent phenotype, the final result of the process).

A logical and historical consequence of the explanatory mechanism presented by Darwin is that *human beings are also placed in causal connections with other species*. Not that the author is unaware of the differences—which are quite evident—that exist between us and other species: Darwin demonstrates that human biological roots are firmly planted in the natural and animal world. These roots had been cut by religious thinking, for which it was offensive to assert the animal ancestry of humans. Interested in placing our species in a place of eminence before the others—man as the crown of creation—this thinking wound up opening a breach between humans and the natural world. For this reason, the consequences of evolutionary theory were unbearable for the nineteenth-century mentality. Even though Darwin had avoided developing the theme of the animal ancestry of man in *On the Origin of Species*, the material found in the text was sufficiently explosive to allow for the inference of what Darwin was cautious about presenting at the time. Well known are the numerous caricatures published in newspapers and magazines of the period that presented an animalized Darwin, with a monkey's tail and climbing a tree, in the prejudiced joke that his theory was only true for him. The theme of the profound transformation of the image of the human species produced by Darwinism will be addressed later on. For now, it can be affirmed that this loss of ingenuity had long-lasting consequences, to the point that contemporary anti-Darwinists appear above all to be *reactive*: they react with indignation to a self-image of human autonomy that has already been strongly shaken.

## THE RELIGIOUS RUPTURE: THE DARWINIAN CRITIQUE OF CREATIONISM

The decisive inclusion of humanity in the natural order<sup>17</sup> leads to the main theme of this chapter: the deepening of the differences between Darwin's mode of operating and religious thinking. Darwinism is a secular form of knowledge above all because it breaks with an anthropomorphic religious tradition present in the history of human thought. To summarize it briefly, anthropomorphic thinking gives human form (*morphos*) to that which is unknown. Many times in history men and women have proceeded in this manner: the noise of thunder, the disturbances caused by a flood, the occurrence of an endemic disease, all of these are real examples of phenomena whose origin was unknown, interpreted anthropomorphically as a manifestation of the moods of a divinity.

Even in recent times, this ancient tendency that attributes a human form to that which is not known continues to be active. The AIDS outbreak in the early 1980s is an example. Religious leaders throughout the world publicly declared that the epidemic was divine punishment for those who exercised a certain sexual option. A tremendous effort by the scientific community and of activists of sexual identities was needed to show that the virus responsible for the pathology did not discriminate by the sexual preference of its carrier: it has its own becoming, quite distinct from human logic and morality, and can afflict homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual subjects.

In general, the challenge to scientific knowledge is to overcome this persistent anthropomorphic tendency and endeavor to visualize the real through its own logic. But this is not to affirm that it is possible to eliminate the presence of the human subject in knowledge. There is no

<sup>17</sup> I emphasize that Darwinism *includes* man in the natural order, because this was precisely a fundamental difference with religious thinking. However, once this necessary note is made, it must be immediately added that Darwin was quite conscious of the differences—which are actually quite evident—between human beings and other species (such as the capacity for specialized labor, the use of language, the decisive interferences of education, culture). Moreover, he even came to point to the *limits of the concept of natural selection for addressing complex human societies*. That is: it is not necessary to oppose Darwinism to an anthropological or sociological approach, because its founder was not interested—unlike some more recent sociobiologists—in compressing the singularity of the human species to its natural origin, but only to point to the foundational character of the latter. For a Darwinist criticism of sociobiology, see Patrick Tort, 'Darwin Lido e Aprovado', *Crítica Marxista* 11 (2000): 109–22.

doubt that it is always a human subject who asks the questions—even if these questions have roots in living history—generating a certain bias in their approach to reality. To not recognize this would be to incur a naïve empiricism, against which so many philosophers have protested in the history of thought. However, and agreeing with the *critical* realists, what should be underscored is that once the decisive presence of the human subject is recognized, the challenge is to be able to come as close as possible to the real history, capturing its particularity.

Thus, if we have always been immersed in language and its categories (which carry a human mark), this does not mean that we must uncritically project these categories into what we study. An effort at deanthropomorphization is always possible, and the history of the sciences offers excellent proof of this. The task at hand can thus be summarized as follows: knowing that knowledge has an evident human origin, how can it approximate that which is heterogeneous, toward a deanthropomorphization? In summary: even knowing that complete objectivity is obviously impossible, efforts in this direction are an integral part of scientific activity.

This was precisely the effort that Darwin made: instead of an industrious God, who gave form to the final product of his creation (the book of Genesis affirms that God created man in his image and in his own likeness), the theory of evolution presents an impersonal process with its own logic and integrity, distinct from human desires: “species are produced and exterminated by slowly acting and still existing causes, and not by miraculous acts of creation.”<sup>18</sup> As disconcerting as this may appear, by locating our species in the animal world, Darwin ends up operating a decided deanthropomorphization. Instead of affirming that species were generated by a creator God (a projection of ourselves in a supernatural superman), Darwin presents a natural process guided by a logic different from that which commands human desires and fears.

Conflicts between the biblical text and scientific discoveries certainly were not new: the episode of Galileo Galilei (who in conflict with religious dogma affirmed Copernicus’ thesis that the Earth revolved around the sun) is a known example of how deeply rooted religious beliefs impede the advance of scientific research. The “double-truth theory” arose as an attempt to resolve the impasses generated by these tensions. In sum, this theory—strictly speaking a reinterpretation by modern thinkers of a

<sup>18</sup> Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 427.



theme present in Averroes, a philosopher of the Middle Ages—affirmed that the exercise of faith can be simultaneous to the acceptance of scientific declarations, even when there are signs of contradictions between them. The double-truth theory is usually interpreted<sup>19</sup> as a form of conciliation that allows the development of science in historic periods that are still under the influence of a religious discourse with great prestige. This allows advances in the physical sciences, as long as they do not question the predominant transcendent ontology (which was responsible for the responses to the most general questions referring to the origin of the world and to the place that humanity occupies in it).

In the case of the natural sciences of the early nineteenth century, a possible way of reconciling the discoveries of new fossil formations with the biblical text consisted in affirming that God had created and destroyed, over time, different species of animals and plants, but that the Bible only portrayed the creation of the most recent. However, since Darwin, even a compromise of this type became unfeasible: the clash between the different conceptions was too great. For it was not only an issue of dating or details of development that was in question: it was the very core of the biblical account that was strongly challenged. To accept the theses of a text such as *On the Origin of Species* also implied recognizing that either the book of Genesis was wrong, or it should be considered as a primarily metaphorical narrative (a position adopted today by some religious scientists).

Darwinism is a secular form of knowledge precisely because it does not invoke any supernatural intervention to explain the becoming of the objects that it elects as the subject of analysis. Nowhere in *On the Origin of Species* do we find the invocation of a divine intervention performing a central role. It is true that, after taking a long path, Darwin affirmed in the final paragraph of the book that: "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the

<sup>19</sup> As can be seen in Bertrand Russell's commentary on the position of Francis Bacon about the relation between reason and religion: "He [Bacon] accepted orthodox religion; he was not the man to quarrel with the government on such a matter. But while he thought that reason could show the existence of God, he regarded everything else in theology as known only by revelation [...]. He was thus an advocate of the doctrine of 'double truth,' that of reason and that of revelation." Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Touchstone, 1967), 542.

Creator into a few forms or into one.”<sup>20</sup> I will return later to this reference to a Creator, but it does not constitute the core of the argument—or even an important aspect of it—and can be interpreted as an attempt to diminish the foreseeable resistance that his work would encounter. Even when Darwin points out the gaps in his own theory—he has the great intellectual honesty to do so—his confidence that the continuation of scientific research would lead to overcoming the problem is visible.

Take the case of the human eye, this immensely complex organ, whose synchronicity of operations needed for its functioning has always impressed researchers. In fact, the eyes of the higher mammals are often the examples most invoked by creationists to argue that the Darwinian theory of evolution (which holds moments of accidentality within it) is insufficient to explain the sight organs. Creationists affirm that the eye offers complete proof of a divine intelligence that designs the organs and the beings according to its supreme laws. By contrast, in one of his letters to the American naturalist Asa Gray, Darwin affirmed: “The eye to this day gives me a cold shudder, but when I think of the fine known gradations, my reason tells me I ought to conquer the cold shudder.”<sup>21</sup>

What Darwin wrote here is emblematic of his procedure. He preferred to turn to reason—which had already revealed visual gradations in different species that were progressively more complex—as the best way to overcome his “chill.” And today, after a century and a half of research in evolutionary biology, a contemporary researcher clarifies that “Photoreceptor structures (eyes) were acquired independently at least forty times in the animal kingdom.”<sup>22</sup> Instead of a transgression of natural causality (commonly called a miracle) they are an evolutionary gain obtained by distinct organisms which have structures that provide more precise information about the environment in which they live.

There is also the procedure adopted by Darwin to account for gaps in geological knowledge and in the fossil record. In the mid-nineteenth century, these gaps were interpreted as follows: as God made alternating creations and destructions of different species, this would be sufficient

<sup>20</sup> Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 429.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Darwin, ‘Letter to Asa Gray, 8 or 9 February 1860’, in *Darwin Correspondence Project* (University of Cambridge, 2021), <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-2701.xml>.

<sup>22</sup> Ernst Mayr, *What Makes Biology Unique?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 214.

reason for the inexistence of intermediary forms. However, since the nineteenth century, paleontological research progressed enormously and effectively found a much greater extension of forms of transition between extant and extinct species. With this in mind, Darwin's words are still impressive today for their lucidity, as when he cites Charles Lyell, referring to how he views the discontinuities of the aforementioned records:

For my part, following out Lyell's metaphor, I look at the geological record as a history of the world imperfectly kept, and written in a changing dialect; of this history we possess the last volume alone, relating only to two or three countries [...] On this view, the difficulties above discussed are greatly diminished, or even disappear.<sup>23</sup>

This is a basic position: natural phenomena must be explained within their own field of causality, without resorting to a cause that transcends them. It is now known that some of Darwin's hypotheses were not confirmed by later research<sup>24</sup>; but this did not invalidate a certain attitude toward science that is well illustrated by Darwin's expression "*we need not marvel*." This expression designates his own way of reacting to the peculiarities existing in the natural world.

We need not marvel at extinction; if we must marvel, let it be at our own presumption in imagining for a moment that we understand the many complex contingencies on which the existence of each species depends.<sup>25</sup>

There is a philosophical depth here that deserves commentary. The sensation of "the marvelous," of wonder—as if facing something supernatural—arises from the lack of knowledge about the origin and ramifications of the phenomenon investigated; that is, when it is only seen in its current form. For when the countless connections that led to the formation of the different beings are reconstituted, they are no longer seen as the result of a transcendent process. But they do not lose a single

<sup>23</sup> Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 289.

<sup>24</sup> It is enough to recall Darwin's supposition about the necessarily gradual and continual character of the becoming of species, critically debated in 1972 by the *theory of punctuated equilibrium* presented by Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould.

<sup>25</sup> Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 297.

millimeter of their integrity through this procedure, on the contrary: “they seem to me to become ennobled.”<sup>26</sup>

Darwin brings to mind those analyses that detect in the history of human thinking two distinct ways of reacting to what is not known. In the first, the gap in knowledge is occupied by a sense of the divine and the supernatural (and, as just seen, with anthropomorphic characteristics): the complexity of the human eye is recognized as the signature of a higher intelligence. While in the second mode, the astonishment inspires an investigation to elucidate the causal connections that produce what, at that time, is unknown. In the words of N. von Zuben, commenting on the singularity of philosophical thought in Greece:

“Wonder – Socrates said in the *Theaetetus* – philosophy has no other beginning (155d).” *Thaumadzein*, wonder, or amazement, testifies to the change, the transformation that takes place in relation to myth. In it, *thauma* is the object of wonder, admiration; the effect it produces is the sign, in it, of the presence of the supernatural. While for their antecessors wonderment before a phenomenon imposed a sense of the divine, for the Milesians wonder was presented to the spirits as *aporia*, as a question. (...) Upon being reintegrated in the order of nature, the *thauma*, or that which remains of the “marvelous”, is at the conclusion of the investigation the ingenuity of the solution found and proposed.<sup>27</sup>

Darwin opted decidedly for the second procedure, which the passage calls *philosophical*. He persists in the investigation of what was hitherto unknown: the origin of the eye and of its mechanism for grasping reality, or the decision to better trace the gaps in the fossil records. Darwin was certainly not the first thinker to proceed in this way: he had several illustrious predecessors. We can go far back in the history of philosophy and find among the Greeks themselves thinkers who gradually distanced themselves from the ancient position: Aristotle, for instance, with his dissatisfaction with Platonic thinking and his approximation to a more immanent way of addressing the real. The initial chapters of this book mentioned that the work of Spinoza (accused of atheism and expelled

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>27</sup> Newton Aquiles von Zuben, ‘Filosofia e Educação: Atitude Filosófica e a Questão da Apropriação do Filosofar’, *Pro-Posições, Revista da Faculdade de Educação da UNICAMP* 3, no. 2 (July 1992): 15–16.

from the Amsterdam Synagogue in 1656) contained a very explicit opposition to procedures that, instead of recognizing a lack of knowledge about a phenomenon, prefer to attribute it to the will of God. According to Spinoza's caustic formulation, the will of God is the *asylum ignorantiae*<sup>28</sup>: an imaginary shelter, an invocation of the divine that simply hides our lack of knowledge. Incidentally, there are occasions when Darwin appears to echo Spinoza's words—and it does not matter if this was voluntary or not—as when the naturalist affirms that “It is so easy to hide our ignorance under such expressions as the ‘plan of creation,’ ‘unity of design,’ &c., and to think that we give an explanation when we only re-state a fact.”<sup>29</sup> Of course today, in the world of biology, it is known that the supposed “plan of creation” merely hides that which at the time human knowledge was not able to explain.

An example given by Marx is also pertinent here. He criticized Hegel, who was perhaps the most important philosophical reference of Marx's time, for his understanding that one of the pillars of Hegelianism, the concept of Idea, was above all a sophisticated theoretical version of the ancient Judeo-Christian God.<sup>30</sup> Instead of interpreting the course of human history as a series of stages of exteriorization of the Idea, Marx shows us earthly social forces in conflict, from which results the characteristics of mundane reality. Thus, in the conception of the world developed by thinkers like Spinoza or Marx, there is an explicit refusal of creationism as an explanation for human origin. However, until the mid-nineteenth century, an alternative substantive approach for addressing the “mystery of mysteries,”<sup>31</sup> the origin of species, was not available. Before Darwin, among the aforementioned thinkers there was a dissatisfaction with the theological mode of approaching questions related to the origin

<sup>28</sup> Baruch Spinoza, ‘Ethics’, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) I, Appendix, 443. The English translator opted for “sanctuary of ignorance.”

<sup>29</sup> Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 422.

<sup>30</sup> “For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of ‘the Idea’, is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought.” Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1982), 102. As I mentioned in the Preface of this book, Hegel himself assumed explicitly his religious beliefs.

<sup>31</sup> Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 1.

of the human species—and the indication of its mistakes—but not yet a substantive theory that offered a real alternative.

It was precisely this *plane of immanence* that Darwin established by affirming that species are differentiated by natural selection.<sup>32</sup> There are countless moments in *The Origin of Species* when this is clear; as when the text complains of how the treatment given by researchers bound to a religious formation differed for those phenomena that they have difficulty explaining. While they emphatically and nearly a priori refuse a mundane explanation, they readily accept a miraculous explanation:

Although naturalists very properly demand a full explanation of every difficulty from those who believe in the mutability of species, on their own side they ignore the whole subject of the first appearance of species in what they consider reverent silence.<sup>33</sup>

In our twenty-first century, it is possible to question the primacy attributed to human reason as the predominant mode of relating to reality. The criticism of logocentrism deserves great attention, an exacerbation of reason that led to an exaggerated optimism about the future of science (as well as a repression of the other human capacities). But the fact is that in Darwin's context, and in the face of the interlocutors with whom he debated, his rationalist procedure was undeniably progressive and revolutionary: a firm refusal of an explanation of a religious nature that blocked the progress of science. Even today this procedure is emancipatory given the resurgence of religious fundamentalisms, with their known regressive characteristics that deny reality.

I thus agree with those who affirmed—beginning with Freud—that Darwin inflicted a severe “blow to human narcissism.”<sup>34</sup> If Aristarchus and Copernicus had already dethroned Earth from its supposed place at

<sup>32</sup> In terms of the question of the *origin of life* itself—which was not the object of Darwin's research—only in the twentieth century was a more satisfactory scientific explanation found, one that was entirely compatible with biological evolutionism. Examples of this are the hypotheses, developed independently, by Alexander Oparin and John B. Haldane.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 355.

<sup>34</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), 141.

the center of the solar system, Darwinism dethroned the human species from its image of itself at the apex, the crown of creation. A consequence of this is to also understand that the laws of nature are not moral: they are determined by their own logic, different from that stipulated by human beings in their social conviviality. *The Origin of Species* offers a harsh portrait, not at all heavenly, of natural life. As in the case of the *ichneumonidae* wasps that lay their eggs in the bodies of caterpillars, when the wasp larvae are born, they feed on the living body of the host, causing its death. According to our human values, this is extremely cruel, but commonplace in the natural world and, moreover, infinitely distant from a religious theodicy that guarantees justice for all beings at the end of times.

\* \* \*

A question now presents itself. Must this entire debate be interpreted as a necessary sign that Darwin and evolutionary biologists are atheists? In fact, the answer to the question is “no.” As Darwin stated to John Fordyce:

It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist & an evolutionist. [...] What my own views may be is a question of no consequence to any one except myself.— But as you ask, I may state that my judgment often fluctuates.<sup>35</sup>

The final section of this chapter will address some of Darwin's oscillations in relation to his own (ir)religiosity. Before that, it should be clarified that the dominant situation within the community of biologists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries shows the existence of quite distinct positions in this regard: they range from convicted atheists to religious practitioners. Richard Dawkins is currently visible for his known pro-atheist activism, but Theodosius Dobzhansky is a contrasting example. Perhaps one of the most important twentieth-century evolutionists, he maintained his religious beliefs until his death in 1975.

The relations between science and religion demand, in effect, a nuanced approach. For the purposes of this chapter, the emphasis has

<sup>35</sup> Charles Darwin, ‘Letter to John Fordyce, 7 May 1879’, in *Darwin Correspondence Project* (University of Cambridge, 2021), <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/?docId=letters/DCP-LETT-12041.xml>.

been on discontinuity, the break that Darwin effected with a dogmatic religious discourse. An examination of the configuration assumed by the scientific field at the beginning of this twenty-first century reveals that it assumes a singular trait. Since the last third of the twentieth century, the defense of atheism by prominent segments of the scientific community came to coexist with other tendencies that sought to combine science and religion. The latter are inscribed in the general rubric of *holism* and distance themselves from what their followers understand to be an exasperation of the rationalist paradigm. This proposal for an alliance gained allies who readily find space in the media, such as Fritjof Capra, Amit Goswami, Rupert Sheldrake and others. Personally, I understand the philosophical presumptions of this new attempt to unite science and religion to be quite fragile—strictly speaking, it represents an old philosophical idealism that reappears in a new guise—for the reasons presented in a previous chapter of this book.<sup>36</sup> In any case, both the *sui generis* religiosity of the first Darwin and the desire to ally science and religion manifested by some contemporary authors are quite distinct phenomena from the uncontested hegemony of the religious discourse throughout the nineteenth century (in particular in the field of biology).

In this sense, Darwin's response to Fordyce when asked about his religious feelings is telling: "a question of no consequence to any one except myself." A long process of secularization was necessary for the social acceptance of such a response. Religion is now *subjectified*: the practice of a certain creed becomes an issue of one's private life. Initially a personal adherence, it could find institutional mechanisms for its effectuation, but these mechanisms would not have an unquestioned veto power on the undertaking, for example, of scientific research. A field of dispute is established here with unpredictable results, which vary according to the correlation of forces existing in each country and at each determined historic moment. That is why it is a very different situation from the one prevailing at the time of the double-truth theory (seventeenth century), which involved a hegemonic religious power stipulating an agenda of beliefs and procedures that were to be forcibly followed. In contrast, for the contemporary situation to be able to manifest itself, in addition to objective historical processes, a development of accentuated subjectification of faith was necessary. This means that the founding texts of

<sup>36</sup> Chapter 5 of this book, *Materialism and subjectivity*, discusses the inconsistencies of the so-called holism at greater length.



Christianity would come to be considered not as an absolute truth that must be followed literally—as was the case in Darwin's time—but rather as documents of a culture that required recurrent interpretation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, religious leaders certainly sought to affirm their particular beliefs (which often denied science). But even in a country like Brazil—undergoing striking social setbacks during the Bolsonaro government—the defense of science and of some social movements in favor of vaccines ended up predominating and generating effects on the population.

Strictly speaking, historic subjectification processes of different religions certainly predate Darwin. Specialists in the field regularly mention the Protestant Reformation as a decisive moment in this long historic path.<sup>37</sup> In addition to his position concerning issues of doctrine, Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German certainly expanded the numbers of readers of the text and exponentially increased the diversity of interpretations. But even in this case, the biblical text continued to have a central role in the Reformed religions, appearing as the reference in each exegetical dispute, yet obviously interpreted in different manners.

Contemporary religion takes the tendency to subjectification to extremes (and today this is true for both Catholics and Protestants). Not that the leadership of each religious movement has abdicated its role to prescribe the biblical interpretation it judges correct, as well as the behavior to be followed by its believers. For example, in Catholicism of the early twenty-first century, both Pope Benedict XVI and the current Pope Francis often pronounced not only upon religious issues, but also moral, political and even scientific ones. However, these prescriptive declarations arrive in a highly modified form to the faithful. There are some who effectively follow them to the letter, while a large segment makes broad adaptations of them in their personal life. A subjectified religion is precisely one where there is large margin for adaptations made by each group of the faithful in the face of prescriptions. In Brazil, for example, when Pope Benedict XVI came to the country, many cried emotionally upon simply seeing his image on television, only to return immediately to syncretic practices that the Pontiff had just emphatically condemned. And even in countries where religious syncretism is not as accentuated as in Brazil, blind obedience to declarations of religious

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Oliver Tolle, 'Um Herói da Subjetividade', *Revista de Filosofia Moderna e Contemporânea* 5, no. 2 (2018): 107–22.

leaders is limited to minority groups. This possibility was very limited in the Middle Ages, or to use current examples, in the different fundamentalisms (which are certainly expanding), where followers are indeed penalized for not fully adhering to a certain doctrinal corpus.

## THE DEBATE ABOUT TELEOLOGY IN DARWIN

Returning to Darwin, it is now necessary to examine the aforementioned controversy concerning the existence—or not—of concepts of religious influence in *On the Origin of Species*. There are several ways to enter this debate, perhaps the most productive of which is to examine the always controversial concept of teleology.

The Greek word *telos* is most commonly translated as “goal” or “end.” A teleological worldview supposes that a hidden purpose underlies the various events in the course of history. Not by chance, religious worldviews are strongly teleological; they suppose that what occurs in the natural and social world is part of an architecture that is guided toward perfection of the human species. In this perspective, even small daily events are interpreted as being inscribed within a greater purpose: each event only gains its true meaning when inserted into this final perspective. Since Darwin published *The Origin of Species* there has been intense debate about the relation of his theory with so-called natural teleology. Summing up an impressively rich bibliography, I agree with those interpreters who claim that there is a real tension in Darwin’s argument in this respect. The title of an important 1994 article by Michael Ghiselin (written in polemic with James Lennox) is instructive “Darwin’s language may seem teleological, but his thinking is another matter.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, when Darwin presents a detailed analysis of the consequences of the variation in offspring of a species (through which the most apt survive, generating a larger number of descendants), he breaks from the traditional finalist vision and presents a history without a purpose to its course, where there is no teleology inscribed within it. This appears to be the most original and consistent dimension of Darwin’s argument: it is perhaps the greatest

<sup>38</sup> The details of the polemic between Ghiselin and Lennox can be found in: James Lennox, ‘Darwin Was a Teleologist’, *Biology and Philosophy* 8 (1993): 409–23, and in the response by Michael T. Ghiselin, ‘Darwin’s Language May Seem Teleological, but His Thinking Is Another Matter’, *Biology and Philosophy* 9 (1994): 489–92.

discontinuity that his thought established in relation to the prevailing mentality of his time.

A particularly clear example of this line is also offered by Henry Bernard Kettlewell,<sup>39</sup> when he studied the transformations undergone over the centuries by the moth *biston betularia* in areas afflicted by industrial pollution. It has been documented that the oldest species of this moth had a silvery-white color and was well hidden from its predators when perched on tree trunks covered with lichen. It is now known that the melanic form of *biston betularia*, which was at first a minority, was the result of a mutation. This mutation proliferated with the industrialization of vast areas of England in the nineteenth century. Upon seeing these nearly invisible dark moths on tree trunks one may suppose that their color arose *for the purpose* of protecting them from predators (which would characterize the teleological process per se). However, a review of the different phases of the evolutionary process indicates that there was no previous purpose, but one that can be roughly divided into two steps. In the first step, a random genetic mutation caused the appearance of the dark variant of the moth; then, due to the environmental conditions altered by pollution, the descendants of this mutant had greater chances for survival and, over time, wound up numerically overcoming the original silvery-white type (which was more exposed to predators due to the dark soot that accumulated on the trees from industrial pollution).

In other words, *there was no goal commanding this process—although it may seem this way if only the final result is considered—but only a concatenation of impersonal causes operating without previous finality*. The teleological mistake arises when the finished form of the phenomenon hides its true genesis. We owe to Darwin this more sober depiction of natural processes. Those unaware of this new understanding involuntarily rehabilitate an old vision of the religious world, which sees hidden designs—only accessible to the eye of the initiated—throughout history; a worldview that yearns to validate its belief in a God who acts to ensure the progressive march of life toward the final redemption of all beings.

However, just as *The Origin of Species* offers the conceptual tools needed to overcome a finalist vision, it is also necessary to say that

<sup>39</sup> Henry Kettlewell, 'A Survey of the Frequencies of *Biston Betularia* (L.) (Lep.) and Its Melanic Forms in Great Britain', *Heredity* 12 (1958): 51–72. By all indications, Darwin was not aware of the specific case of these moths, which strongly corroborated his theory of descent with modifications.

at least in its original formulation, the fundamental concept of natural selection also presents a teleological trait. This is because it was originally extracted from a comparison to breeders of animals and plants, who from among the offspring of a certain species, select those specimens that they want to reproduce according to criteria based on human values: the most “good,” or the most “beautiful,” etc. By introducing this comparison in his text, Darwin seeks above all to clarify the understanding of the enormous historical changes that species found today have gone through, revealing that contact with only current specimens is not enough to attest to the immense distance between them and their remote ancestors. However, this analogy between human action undertaken by animal breeders and nature winds up bringing to the Darwinian argument a complicating element that later generated immense controversies. After all, the following step of the argument would be to affirm that nature itself—and not just human beings—is capable of operating an analogous selection. Hence Darwin’s statement:

If man can by patience select variations useful to him, why, under changing and complex conditions of life, should not variations useful to nature’s living products often arise, and be preserved or selected? [...] I can see no limit to this power, in slowly and beautifully adapting each form to the most complex relations of life.<sup>40</sup>

The risk here is clear: to attribute to nature the role of a subject with will who consciously or unconsciously follows the implicit goal of producing “more useful” life forms. In the case of animal breeders who plan which characteristics they want to accentuate, there is in fact a conscious human subject who establishes purposes (and whose activity takes place under the aegis of the end set as an objective). But when considering nature, if the existence of an analogous process is admitted, this would be one step from also admitting the existence of a God operating underlying natural processes. If this is only one possible interpretation at the beginning of *The Origin of Species*, it gains strength in the final pages of the text, when Darwin states that:

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the

<sup>40</sup> Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 412.

higher animals, [...]. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one.<sup>41</sup>

We already know that the text firmly refuses the theory of special creation (a theory that, by affirming that God created each one of the different species separately, prohibits seeing the transformations and connections between them). This refusal was already enough to generate passionate polemics between religious scientists and defenders of Darwinism. These controversies continue today, as can be seen in the growing adherence to creationism in the late twentieth century (whose defenders now prefer the designation *intelligent design*). But in the last passage of *The Origin of Species* cited, suppositions of a peculiar finalist conception of the world still infiltrate the Darwinian text of 1859. It allows the interpretation of nature as a subject with will, acting toward its progressive improvement.

Now that the tensions existing in the foundational text of 1859 have been presented, it must be said that a commentary on Darwin's complex relations with different teleological conceptions would not be complete if it were restricted to this text. In fact, as usually occurs with any great author over the course of his life, Darwin's later positions on the topic in focus began to differ. In a late text, his crucial *Autobiography* (written in 1876 and published only after Darwin's death) there are formulations about this particular issue that rectify aspects of the work of 1859. This is because, although in *The Origin of Species* the confrontation with the theory of special creation was explicit and clearly evident, the text left open the possibility of thinking of a God as the primary cause, which developed over time. This is what Darwin tells us in 1876, retrospectively presenting his own trajectory:

When thus reflecting I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and I deserve to be called a Theist. This conclusion was strong in my mind about the time, as far as I can remember, when I wrote the *Origin of Species*; and it is since that time that it has very gradually with many fluctuations become weaker.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 429.

<sup>42</sup> Nora Barlow, ed., *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809–1882* (London: Collins, 1958), 92–93.

We thus see that in 1876, Darwin explicitly refers to himself as a “theist” at the time of the writing of *On the Origin* (as much as this would contradict his current image). However, “disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete,”<sup>43</sup> to the degree that henceforth he declared himself agnostic.

Very symptomatically, the inflection in Darwin’s position regarding the existence of a God also influences the criticisms of the suppositions of the existence of planning in nature. Once again, I turn to his *Autobiography*, as the comment here is decisive for making this issue clearer:

The old argument of design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered. We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows [...].<sup>44</sup>

The passage is well honed: it rectifies some finalist tendencies found in *The Origin of Species*. For instance, when considering a door hinge, one could correctly affirm that it is the product of human planning that guided its fabrication since its first conception. This truly involves a teleological activity. However, everything changes when considering—to continue with Darwin’s example—the hinge of a bivalve shell. The natural articulation that joins the two constitutive parts of the shell was not planned: it is rather the product of a long historical process that was not guided by a previous purpose.

In other words: *while the text of 1859 approximates human activity (that of animal breeders) with the becoming of nature, in 1876 we find a Darwin concerned with distinguishing these two forms of becoming.* While planned human activity produces a door hinge, the bivalve shell should not be viewed from the same perspective. The secular and deanthropomorphizing tendencies—which certainly existed in *The Origin of Species*—are brought to their ultimate consequences in the *Autobiography*. It is also important to note that some of the observations of the latter text

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 87.

that were most critical of religious beliefs led Francis Darwin, the naturalist's son, to suppress them in the first edition of the book. Only on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of *On the Origin* were the passages that had been omitted from the *Autobiography* restored, a good indication of the scope of the conflict.

Among scholars of Darwin, the issue being examined here is so crucial that it generated sharp divergences in the exegetical debate about his work. Among those who seek to affirm the teleological character of evolution, it is noteworthy that some had a strong religious education. These include illustrious examples such as Theodosius Dobzhansky and Francisco Ayala. The first, to whom we owe the development of the synthetic theory of evolution and who is often considered one of the greatest evolutionists of the twentieth century, had declared affinities with the Eastern Orthodox Church. The second, Ayala, a former Dominican priest, is noted for his contributions to the study of *Trypanosoma cruzi*, among other studies. Both highlight in their more philosophical texts what appears to them to be a teleological dimension of evolution.<sup>45</sup> I obviously do not intend to disqualify the magnitude of the substantive contributions of these researchers: they are justly revered internationally. I only want to make clear that a more intense religious education at times leaves marks on the subsequent trajectory of an author even in his field of specialty.

At the other end of the debate are atheist authors such as Ernst Mayr, Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Dawkins; from Darwin's extensive work, they prefer to emphasize those passages that point to the unguided character of evolution. It is enough to recall here a famous text by Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*, whose title takes to its ultimate consequences Darwinian indications in a polemic over William Paley's argument about a watchmaker.<sup>46</sup> I will not hide my personal preference: at least about the issue being examined, I agree with the antiteleological perspective, which presents history with no guarantees of moral improvement of the species through natural selection. This perspective substantially differs, for

<sup>45</sup> Francisco Ayala and Theodosius Dobzhansky, *Estudios sobre la Filosofía de la Biología* (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1983).

<sup>46</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

example, from the desire of Francisco Ayala to see the problem of “evil in the world as imperfection in search of perfection.”<sup>47</sup>

To conclude this chapter, it is fitting to cite one of Ernst Mayr’s last books, *What Makes Biology Unique?: Considerations on the Autonomy of a Scientific Discipline*, published in 2004, when the author was 100 years old, and after decades of research in evolutionary biology. After complaining about the lack of empiric research in the current bibliography produced by the philosophy of biology—a gap that certainly compromises the advance of any well-substantiated debate—Mayr dedicates an entire chapter of this work of synthesis to the concept of teleology, analytically unpacking it into distinct meanings.<sup>48</sup> This is not the place to reconstitute his argument, but to retain the most solid elements of the path that he takes.

The procedure adopted by the author can be called an effort of conceptual delimitation: instead of resorting to a mega concept of teleology, in which everything fits but ends up explaining nothing, it is much better to identify in what precise sense one is speaking of a teleology. Thus, on a local level, it is possible at times to identify behavior with a purposeful aim, as occurs, according to Mayr, with some species of birds that bury pine cones in autumn and retrieve them months later, at the end of winter, when other natural resources are scarce. However, the inflation of teleology to natural processes as a whole—and also for natural selection itself—is abusive and must be rejected. This is why a critique is necessary of macro teleology, which in its conceptual religious foundation insists on affirming the existence of a progressive improvement in the natural and human world.

After these considerations, let’s engage in a reading experience. Bearing in mind the example mentioned of the *biston betularia* moths (whose darker variant numerically supplanted the original lighter species as industrial pollution increased), the following comment of Mayr about certain adaptive characteristics that are the result of natural selection processes offers important insights. Although the empirical reference in the passage below is not in regard to that example, it does provide an appropriate categorical framework for visualizing it:

<sup>47</sup> Apud Cecilia Valenzuela, ‘Dr Francisco Ayala, Doctor Honoris Causa de la Universidad de Chile’, *El Pulso*, 6 October 2010, <http://elpulso.med.uchile.cl/20101006/noticia2.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Mayr, *What Makes Biology Unique?*, 39–66.



Darwin has taught us that seemingly teleological evolutionary changes and the production of adapted features are simply the result of variational evolution, consisting of the production of large amounts of variation in every generation, and the probabilistic survival of those individuals remaining after the elimination of the least-fit phenotypes. Adaptedness thus is an a posteriori result rather than an a priori goal seeking. For this reason, the word teleological is misleading when applied to adapted features.<sup>49</sup>

It is not necessary to be a professional philosopher to perceive the immense consequences of the understanding that we live, after all, in a nature without purpose. To soberly recognize this fact can help strengthen the capacity of human action, which is indeed capable of consciously pursuing its objectives.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 58. And a bit further on: “natural selection is an optimization process, but it has no definite goal, and, [...], it would be most misleading to call it teleological.” Ibid., 62.

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## History and Teleology in Darwin and Marx: Introducing the Debate

Teleology, “as commonly understood, had received its deathblow at Mr. Darwin’s hands,” declared Thomas Huxley<sup>1</sup> upon reading *On the Origin of Species* (published in 1859). The significance of this commentary will become clearer if we reconstitute the intellectual milieu of the mid-nineteenth century.

There was at the time a predominant conception that the course of history in the natural and social world was guided by a purpose, a *telos*. Despite differences between each teleological perspective, there was a common understanding that the finality to be attained was related to the improvement of the different living species, including and above all the human species. Upon closer examination of the philosophical presuppositions of teleological perspectives, one discovers that they are rooted in a certain religious conception of the cosmos, common to various cosmologies: the image of a preexisting God or demiurge that imprints its purpose

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<sup>1</sup> Apud Ernst Mayr, *What Makes Biology Unique?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 41.

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The first part of this chapter takes up some of the arguments presented in the previous chapter, *Philosophical Consequences of Darwin’s Polemic with Religious Thought*, and includes new material related to the category of teleology in Marx and his reception of Darwin’s work.

on an initially amorphous matter. From Plato's *Timaeus*<sup>2</sup> to the culmination of Hegel's Absolute Idea, the search for a purpose was conceived as an unescapable driving force exerting its effects in vast domains of experience.

But why, among so many aspects of such an extensive work, was it precisely the anti-teleological content of *On the Origin of Species* that caught Huxley's attention? And why did Friedrich Engels, upon his reading of the same text, write a letter to Karl Marx declaring that "There was one aspect of teleology that had yet to be demolished, and that has now been done"<sup>3</sup>?

This chapter has at least a twofold objective. The first is to elucidate the reasons why Darwin's conception of species modifications was received as a critique of natural teleology. The second is to show that Marx—certainly following a path quite different from Darwin's—was involved throughout his work in a debate with the teleological conceptions of his time, but with *human* history as his object. It should also be noted that during Marx's own reading of *On the Origin*, he wrote to Engels (on December 19, 1860) that "this is the book which, in the field of natural history, provides the basis for our views." Now, when a thinker of Marx's stature affirms that he found in Darwin a basis (*Grundlage*) for his own conception, this should be taken seriously and deserves explicit investigation.

On the other hand, the task is made more difficult when recognizing that the issue to be examined became particularly controversial in the later bibliography. There are authors who understand (differently than Huxley and Engels) that Darwinism is, after all, a sophisticated form of teleology, to the point that James Lennox—a respected contemporary biologist—wrote an article entitled: "Darwin *was* a teleologist."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, with regard to the reception of Marx, several interpretations affirm that, in essence, the Marxian wager on a future socialist society would be the

<sup>2</sup> According to the cosmological account of *Timaeus*: "Reason prevailed over necessity by persuading it to *steer* the majority of created things *towards* perfection, [...]." Plato, *Timaeus and Critias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 48a, 39, my emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Engels, 'Engels to Marx, 11 or 12 December, 1859', in *MECW*, vol. 40 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 551.

<sup>4</sup> James Lennox, 'Darwin Was a Teleologist', *Biology and Philosophy* 8 (1993): 409–23. This article stimulated Michael T. Ghiselin to write another in response, whose title is, symptomatically: 'Darwin's Language May Seem Teleological, but His Thinking Is Another Matter', *Biology and Philosophy* 9 (1994): 489–92.

reissue of a secularized eschatology (it's enough to recall the interpretive line of Raymond Aron, among others<sup>5</sup>). Hence, the tenor of Darwin's and Marx's relationship to a teleological view of history, far from generating a minimal consensus among commentators, actually provoked the sharpest divisions among them.

But before facing this thematic crux—with all the controversies that characterize it—a last introductory comment is necessary. The approximation just made between the conceptions of Darwin and Marx certainly does not mean that there are no divergences between these two thinkers. Differences exist and they are considerable. Besides the quite evident fact that Darwin was concerned with phenomena of the natural world while Marx chose as his object developed human societies, there are real tensions between the two worldviews. It is well known, for example, that along with his initial enthusiasm for *On the Origin of Species*, Marx also claimed that Darwin had uncritically transposed the competitive reality of a capitalist society to the domain of natural phenomena. This can be seen in a letter sent to Engels on June 18, 1862: "It is remarkable how Darwin rediscovers, among the beasts and plants, the society of England with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, 'inventions' and Malthusian 'struggle for existence'."<sup>6</sup>

Years later, in a letter of 1880, Marx's son-in-law Edward Aveling asked Darwin if he would accept that a book written by Aveling himself

<sup>5</sup> "To all intents and purposes, this philosophy [Marxism] subsumes the prophetism." Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1962), 56.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, 'Marx to Engels, 18 June, 1862', in *MECW*, vol. 41 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 381. In 1983, the French philosopher Dominique Lecourt invested great effort to sarcastically claim that "neither Marx nor Engels could never understand the Darwinian theory of natural selection." Cf. Dominique Lecourt, 'Marx no Crivo de Darwin', *Crítica Marxista* 52 (2021): 129–52. Lecourt bases this claim on Marx's enthusiasm for the evolutionary theses of Pierre Trémaux. This was a real error of judgment, made even after Engels' sober warnings about Trémaux's theoretical weakness. *But Lecourt did not respond the central question: why did even authors outside the Marxist camp also detect the mark of liberal and highly individualist thinking in Darwin?* Such is the case of Adrian Desmond and James Moore, competent Darwinists, but who recognize that there was a "rampant Malthusian individualism" in Darwin's ideas, an involuntary confirmation of the validity of Marx's criticism of Darwin. Cf. Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause: Race, Slavery and the Quest for Human Origins* (London: Penguin Books, 2009); especially chapter 13, "The Descent of the Races."

be dedicated to the naturalist. Darwin politely declined the request.<sup>7</sup> He expressed his refusal with a written pronouncement suggesting that he had reservations about Aveling's worldview. Acknowledging these real differences between the two authors, an accordance between the Darwinian and Marxian worldviews is still indeed possible, for both do emphasize historicity as a fundamental category for both nature and society. Lukács was right when at the end of his life he stated that "Marx mainly developed – and I consider this the most important part of Marxian theory – the thesis according to which the fundamental category of the social being, and this holds true for all beings, is that he is historical."<sup>8</sup>

The connections between Darwin's and Marx's thinking have indeed been taken up by various authors since the nineteenth century. This article is part of this tradition, seeking its originality not only in the examination of a certain conceptual aspect, but also in the effort to make the debate relevant to today.

\* \* \*

Let us begin with Darwin. To understand his polemic with naturalist teleology, it is necessary to consider that the Darwinian position is situated in a more general conception that affirms the existence of successive transformations of different species, whether animals or plants. The singularity of Darwin's position manifests itself most forcefully when contrasted with the biblical account of the origin of species, present in the book of Genesis. This account influenced nineteenth-century scientists, who assumed that the different living species had been created directly by God. It could not be said that they underwent changes, given that they remained stable over time. To explain the then recent fossil discoveries revealing that the Earth had been populated by other beings, quite different than those found at the time, the existing alternative was to

<sup>7</sup> For many years, it was wrongly assumed that it was Marx himself who wrote to Darwin, with a consideration to dedicate *Capital* to the naturalist. The correct version of this episode can be found in Margaret A. Fay, 'Did Marx Offer to Dedicate Capital to Darwin? A Reassessment of the Evidence', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39, no. 1 (1978): 133–46.

<sup>8</sup> György Lukács, *Pensamento Vivido* (Santo André and Viçosa: Ad hominem; Editora UFV, 1999), 182.

affirm that God had successively created and destroyed various species, but that the Bible only told of the last episode of creation.

On the other hand, by affirming the existence of a common ancestor for different species and, consequently, maintaining that they have changed profoundly over time, Darwin gave a history, so to speak, to the natural world. He shows us that even those forms of life that appear to be more stable are actually the product of a becoming. He stated that “species have been modified, during a long course of descent, by the preservation or the natural selection of many successive slight favourable variations.”<sup>9</sup> Darwin was certainly not the first to claim these changes: he himself, in the initial pages of *On the Origin of Species*, judiciously lists authors such as Lamarck, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and H. C. Wells, among others, as precursors of his theory. But the fact is that Darwin was responsible for the greatest systematization and analysis of the great number of processes that proved his theory of “descent with modification” (the term *evolution* would only become consolidated later on) and, moreover, by the conceptual formulation of the mechanism by which this occurs, natural selection.

Having overcome the limits of the “fixist” conceptions of biblical origin and finally accepting the transformations of the natural world, a crucial question remained: how did this historical becoming occur? Would it be correct to maintain, for instance, that it is commanded by a purpose? It is not the intent here to analyze the different strands of evolutionism present in the nineteenth century; we only mention the one which became known as *orthogenesis*. In sum, orthogenesis assumes that the change in organisms was due to an internal tendency existing within each: this was the desire for change to which Lamarck referred. Despite breaking away from the more orthodox fixist model, the presumed orthogenetic series were teleological: they promoted the belief that the transformations in organisms took place under the aegis of a purpose inscribed within them. The mechanism for species change affirmed by Darwin is quite different, as it is about *natural selection*, to which we turn our attention to now.

Darwin originally formulated the concept of natural selection based on an analogy with the practice of animal and plant breeders. Breeders select from among the offspring of a given species those specimens that they want to reproduce according to human criteria (the most “beautiful,” or

<sup>9</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 353.

the most “hearty,” etc.). When Darwin compared the action of nature with that of these human agents, he was above all seeking to elucidate the enormous historical modifications through which various species have passed. Therefore, the contact with the current living specimen alone is insufficient to attest to the immense distance between it and its most remote ancestor. However, the analogy between natural processes and the animal breeders’ actions generated immense controversies later. For the next step in the argument consisted in the assertion that nature itself—and not only men—is capable of operating an analogous selection. Hence, the position Darwin adopts:

Why, if man can by patience select variations most useful to himself, should nature fail in selecting variations useful, under changing conditions of life, to her living products? [...] I can see no limit to this power, in slowly and beautifully adapting each form to the most complex relations of life.<sup>10</sup>

The risk here is clear: attributing to nature the role of a subject with will, who acts—consciously or unconsciously—according to an implicit goal of producing “more useful” life forms. In the case of the animal and plant breeders who plan which characteristics they want to accentuate, there is in fact a conscious subject who sets ends (the entire activity takes place under the aegis of the ends established as the objective). Yet in regard to nature, to admit the existence of an analogous process risks rehabilitating the old teleology, precisely what was being questioned. If this is only a possible interpretation at the beginning of *On the Origin of Species*, it gains strength in the final pages of the text when Darwin writes “Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life [...].”<sup>11</sup>

Darwin thus accepts a conception of nature as a subject with will, acting toward progressive improvement. We see, therefore, that some assumptions of a particular finalist worldview still remain in Darwin’s text of 1859.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 360.



Having formulated the general framework in which the concept of natural selection was initially inscribed, it should be noted that its theoretical revision points to contents that go beyond the initial finalist metaphor. At first, Darwin emphasized that among the offspring of a species there are small variations that end up interfering in the greater or lesser capacity of their carriers to survive (e.g. the format of the beak of a single species of pigeon is never exactly identical). As the natural environment gradually transforms, and the available resources needed to provide subsistence for all of the biota are often scarce, those variations interfere in the greater reproductive success of their carriers. Over successive generations, an increase of the original differences occurs, in close correlation with changes in the natural environment. It should be noted that when one leaves aside the more general framework of the concept (which presumes all of nature to be a subject with will) and examines specific contents, finality is no longer integral to the mechanism of natural selection. Let's take an example from Darwin himself. In reference to the camouflage found in some species, he writes:

When we see leaf-eating insects green, and bark-feeders mottled-grey; the alpine ptarmigan white in winter [...], we must believe that these tints are of service to these birds and insects in preserving them from danger.<sup>12</sup>

While a teleological approach to this issue would say that a certain color green was acquired "for the purpose" of a species escaping its predators, the explanation by natural selection affirms something quite different. It only observes the fact that among the offspring of insects of a single species, where there are small variations in terms of color, those with the greater chance of survival are those whose coloring is similar to that of the foliage of the environment where they live. Over many generations, the offspring most adapted to this reality will have greater reproductive success.

The phenomenon of camouflage initially appears as a teleological modification because finalist reasoning persistently infiltrates our human perspective on so many occasions. But when examined in light of natural selection, such phenomena come to be understood as the result of a concatenation of efficient causes operating without prior purpose.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 66.

According to the more general comment by Mayr, one of the leading evolutionists of the twentieth century:

Darwin has taught us that seemingly teleological evolutionary changes and the production of adapted features are simply the result of variational evolution, consisting of the production of large amounts of variation in every generation, and the probabilistic survival of those individuals remaining after the elimination of the least-fit phenotypes. Adaptedness thus is an a posteriori result rather than an a priori goal seeking.<sup>13</sup>

Returning to Darwin, it should be noted that years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, he returned to the question of teleology in his *Autobiography* (published in 1876). This work is particularly instructive, as it is possible to witness Darwin's own reflection. The contemporary reader is surprised to find an explicit recognition by the author that at the time *On the Origin* was published, he still had effective religious convictions—although they were quite distinct from traditional creationism—that were rectified in later years. Confirming the hypothesis presented here: if in the 1859 text it is still possible to find problematic passages that may suggest the author's commitment to finalist suppositions, in his *Autobiography* Darwin distances himself more radically from those who believe there is a design in nature:

The old argument of design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered. We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows. Everything in nature is the result of fixed laws.<sup>14</sup>

Darwin consummates here his rupture with the teleological world-view—a break that had already begun in *On the Origin*—and distinguishes at least two distinct levels of organization of beings. While it can legitimately be affirmed that the hinge of a door was designed by men to serve

<sup>13</sup> Mayr, *What Makes Biology Unique?*, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Nora Barlow, ed., *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809–1882* (London: Collins, 1958), 87.

a certain purpose, the same cannot be said of the articulation that joins the two pieces of a bivalve shell. The latter is the result of a process of natural selection, where there was no type of finality commanding its course, but only successive transformations that benefitted the organisms carrying certain characteristics. In his *Autobiography*, we see a Darwin interested in distinguishing two dimensions of being: while in the natural being—in the bivalve shell—one cannot speak of planning, in the human world (in this world where the hinge of a door was developed), it is possible to speak of planning, action oriented toward an end.

\* \* \*

Darwin's example of the door hinge, a product of human labor, offers a suitable occasion to enter into Marx's thought. The German philosopher was undoubtedly one of the thinkers most concerned with this basic experience of our species: the transformation of nature through labor. In Marx's writings where he more thoroughly conceptualizes the elements present in a labor process, the existence of a teleological dimension is undeniable in this specific sphere of being. A well-known passage from *Capital* helps to clarify this:

A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.<sup>15</sup>

These lines emphasize the discontinuity between humans and other species: instead of only instinctual action, the ability to ideally represent their own activity emerges in humans. But let us note that this discontinuity should not be interpreted as an absolute rupture: unlike the creationists of the time (who were interested in affirming the irreducible divine spark of humanity, the crown of creation), neither Darwin nor Marx constructs a wall separating our species from the others. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx writes that "Man is

<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1982), 284.

directly a natural being”<sup>16</sup> (thus a being rooted in nature), adding shortly afterward that man is capable of conscious objectifications that modify him. This fact will prove to be decisive in the course of the progressive exteriorization of human labor: if readers of this book would stop to examine their surroundings, they would not find original nature, but a vast array of buildings, artifacts, etc., products of the objectification of human labor.

It is now appropriate to ask if, in Marx’s conception, the more general course of history is guided by a purpose, as in the experience of labor. Just as with Darwin, this question must be approached with care. Upon initial contact with Marx’s work we find passages that may at first appear to indicate an affirmative answer to this question.

For instance, in the aforementioned *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, when referring to a future communist society, Marx states that “Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.”<sup>17</sup> A statement that claims that there is an enigma (*Rätsel*) in history that finds its solution only at the time when its end is realized (the apex that is a communist society), well, this comes close to a finalist conception of history. This is not to say that this understanding can only be found in the young Marx. It is also found in chapter XXIV of Book I of *Capital*. After analyzing the violence in the process of transition from feudal to capitalist society, the text presents in the following terms his wager on the advent of a socialist society, which Marx understands to be quite close: “The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated [...]. But capitalist production begets, with the necessity of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation.”<sup>18</sup>

By invoking the “necessity of a natural process” (*der Notwendigkeit eines Naturprozesses*), Marx becomes vulnerable to the criticism that his conception is a materialist version of Hegel’s philosophy of history (widely

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’, in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 154.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 929 (translation revised according to the German original).

recognized as teleological).<sup>19</sup> This interpretation is reinforced by the use of the Hegelian concept of “negation of negation.”

That said, let us now turn to an aspect that seems to me the most fruitful in Marx’s thought. The means to deconstruct a possible teleological perspective, to move in the direction of a more open conception of the historical process, are offered by Marx himself in other texts. And it is not necessary to resort only to the work of the mature Marx to support this claim. In his polemic aimed at the neo-Hegelians, already in a text such as *The German Ideology*, there is an excellent passage about this issue (an indicator that it is a mistake to insist upon a strict division between the young and the mature Marx). In this passage, Marx clearly opposes the teleological idealism that characterized the formulation of the neo-Hegelians, where history appears as a subject endowed with will. Distancing himself from that perspective, Marx affirms the profane, mundane character of history:

History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which uses the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations [...]. This can be speculatively distorted so that later history is made the goal of earlier history, e.g., the goal ascribed to the discovery of America is to further the eruption of the French Revolution.<sup>20</sup>

Rejecting the anthropomorphic view, Marx returns history to its proper foundations as a temporal concatenation of different generations of humans relating with each other and with nature. In terms of the existence of a teleology in this process, the synthetic example of the relationship between the discovery of the America and the French Revolution shows that they have only a causal, not a teleological relationship. This means that in analyzing the historical processes that led to the French

<sup>19</sup> Presuming to have revealed a purpose in nature as a whole, which tacitly comes to be thought of as an anthropomorphic being, Hegel understands that it has a goal (*Ziel*) to be attained. We can read in the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*: “The goal of Nature is to kill itself, break the crust of the immediate, sensual, burn itself up like a phoenix, to then emerge from this external appearance rejuvenated as Spirit.” G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Enzyklopädie Der Philosophischen Wissenschaften Im Grundrisse II’, in *Werke*, vol. 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 538.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, in *MECW*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 50.

Revolution, it is legitimate to include among them the arrival of the Spanish to America in 1492. But a teleological perspective is not satisfied with this: it goes much further and maintains that there was a purpose—conscious or unconscious—in the phenomenon of 1492, leading to the outbreak, centuries later, of the French Revolution. Marx's critique is directed at this teleological error, a persistent vice among philosophers and historians.

It is therefore not possible to expand the teleology existing in a labor process to the broader course of history. In other words, it is a mistake to transpose the explanatory categories of the labor process to the macro-historical dimension. In the process of human labor, the activity takes place under the aegis of a causality indeed marked by a teleology. But the same is not true of the course of history as a whole.

But wouldn't it be a contradiction to affirm—as Marx does—that men act in pursuit of ends and in spite of this human history is not teleological? Not at all. In the Marxian conception, human activity leads to a result distinct from that intended by its agents. Whether in the formation of a singular entity, capital (which acquires its own logic of expansion), or in the daily conflicts between social classes, it is worth recalling a passage from Engels that clearly underscores the unpredictability of the historical course thus formed: “For what each individual wants is obstructed by every other individual and the outcome is something that no one wanted.”<sup>21</sup> This formulation reveals the open dimension of human history; it is determined, but still unpredictable.

Followers of Marx and Engels did not always heed the warnings about the care needed when analyzing the different moments of historical processes. The authors were still alive when a version of their thought circulated that interpreted the Marxian hypotheses on the determination of the objective conditions of existence as a kind of prescription to be followed equally by all societies, at any given time and place (a procedure that would characterize a narrow historical finalism). Among the passages in which Marx protests against this vulgarization of his thought—he had already declared that “*Tout ce que je sais, c'est que je ne suis pas*

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Engels, ‘Engels to Joseph Bloch, 21–22 September, 1890’, in *MECW*, vol. 49 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 35.

*Marxiste*”<sup>22</sup>—a letter of 1877 to the editor of the Russian journal *Otechestvennyye Zapiski* deserves special mention. In it, Marx strongly diverges from the interpretation given to his approach to the process of transition from feudal to capitalist society:

It is absolutely necessary for him [my critic] to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, [...] But I beg his pardon. This does me too much honour, and yet puts me to shame at the same time.<sup>23</sup>

What was then for Marx a set of hypotheses for historical research (to be tested in each concrete case), came to be erroneously interpreted as a kind of dogma to be followed universally by all societies.

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In this more synthetic chapter, the objective was to demonstrate that both Marx and Darwin, each in their own field of investigation, substantively modified the understanding of long-term historical processes. In rejecting the fixists theses of his time, Darwin presents nature as a historical reality in transformation, consequently requiring a genealogical understanding of the beings generated in these processes. “Our classifications will come to be, as far as they can be so made, genealogies,”<sup>24</sup> he states at the end of *On the Origin of Species*, expressing his desire to move beyond Linnaeus’ taxonomy. Marx, meanwhile, rejected both Hegel’s theodicy of the Spirit and the empiricists who presented history as a mere “a collection of dead facts,”<sup>25</sup> the prevailing conceptions of his time. The affirmation of history as a process of long duration emerging from the activity of human groups in their interaction with nature comes to the foreground. Precisely on account of the emergence of specifically social categories, the basic Darwinian concept of natural selection—so pertinent to understand the

<sup>22</sup> “All I know is that I’m not a Marxist.” K. Marx apud Friedrich Engels, ‘Engels to Conrad Schmidt, 05 August, 1890’, in *MECW*, vol. 49 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Letter to Otechestvenniye Zapiski, November 1877’, in *MECW*, vol. 24 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 200.

<sup>24</sup> Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 357.

<sup>25</sup> Marx and Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, 37.

history of species—should not be uncritically transposed to the realm of social relations, as attested unfortunately by the voluminous bibliography produced by the defenders of contemporary sociobiology.<sup>26</sup>

These two classic authors confronted an old and persistent teleological conception of nature and history. This conception expands categories that are valid in a certain realm of human experience (such as the labor process), transposing them to processes that, strictly speaking, are not teleological. In other words, the categories of *poiesis*, of production, invade other dimensions of the theory of being, causing distortions that must be rectified.<sup>27</sup>

It should be recognized that in certain passages of the two authors examined it is possible to locate—even if this may seem paradoxical—marks of the finalist conception under question. Thus, an author who wants to present readers a finalist Marx or a teleological Darwin would partially be able to do so because there are indeed moments in the writings of the two thinkers that allow this interpretation. However, in my judgment this approach disregards what is fundamental: the enormous contribution each one made to break with the prevailing worldviews that projected finalist human categories into unintentional processes. In sum, in criticizing teleology, a matrix of thought strongly rooted in the nineteenth century (leaving vestiges in their own work), Marx and Darwin laid the foundations to overcome it. They visualized an open history continuously being made. Such visualization reinforces the importance of an activity of *interpretation* that elaborates upon the writings of these classic authors, taking from them that which is most fruitful and can dialogue with us today.

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<sup>26</sup> On the impossibility of deriving from nature categories and relations that are specifically social, see Chapter 3.

<sup>27</sup> Chapter 2 of this book discusses how Spinoza was one of the strongest critics of teleologism.



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PART IV

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Religious Growth in the Contemporary  
World



## When a Sociology of Science Is Necessary: Contemporary Aspects of the Conflict Between Creationists and Evolutionists

Much has been written about the conceptual errors that the creationist doctrine<sup>1</sup> incurs in its polemic with Darwinism, as well as the absence of a research program within the doctrine that allows any advance in the life sciences. Much less examined, however, is the historical and social context that enabled the expansion of the creationists and their most recent development, the so-called intelligent design.<sup>2</sup> This chapter focuses on this context, seeking to reveal its distinctive characteristics. For this purpose, it will be necessary to go beyond the purely conceptual space in which the debate between the creationists and the evolutionists takes place, and analyze explicitly the contradictory determinations of the contemporary world. I support the hypothesis that it is precisely these contradictions that establish the backdrop from which the creationists' dissatisfaction with current society is drawn. Since the movement had its origins and

<sup>1</sup> For readers unfamiliar with this debate, *creationism* is the name of a religious doctrine that rejects Charles Darwin's theses regarding the origin of species and maintains the literalness of the biblical account of creation, as found in the Book of Genesis.

<sup>2</sup> The equivalence of creationism and intelligent design (the latter adopting a more sophisticated language, borrowed from sciences such as biochemistry) will be explained during this chapter.

development in the United States as early as the 1920s,<sup>3</sup> this country will be the main focus of attention here. But this in no way means that creationism is restricted to the United States: the internationalization of the movement will also be addressed (including references to Brazil, my country of origin). This macrosocial approach supplies additional meanings to this religious worldview that are much more enlightening than a purely exegetical examination of its doctrinal texts would allow.

Like any movement of ideas that spreads nationally and internationally, creationism has a number of internal facets. These strands are in disagreement among themselves regarding the correct exegetical approach to the biblical text. Therefore, when one speaks in broad terms about creationism, it is in truth a generalization,<sup>4</sup> made possible by the existence of a strong common denominator among its different tendencies. This denominator consists of an intransigent rejection of Darwin's theses on the evolution of species, allied with a clamor for the need to return to the biblical text, considered the true explanatory document on the origins of life and the human species. These characteristics lead to another shared goal, not always perceptible to the uninformed observer: the proposal to end the separation of church and state, allowing the former to return to legislating over the most wide-ranging aspects of human conduct. Thus, it is not only a religious doctrine; creationism also promotes a political agenda. Darwinism is not its only adversary—even if it is its most recurrent one—, there are other interlocutors in its formulations that deserve to be known. To substantiate this hypothesis, the first part of this chapter will examine some of the pronouncements by the movement's significant leaders. The second part will analyze those characteristics of the contemporary world that appear as if transfigured by its discourse.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Watts and Ulrich Kutschera, 'On the Historical Roots of Creationism and Intelligent Design: German *Allmacht* and Darwinian Evolution in Context', *Theory Biosci* 140 (2021): 157–68.

<sup>4</sup> The main historian of the movement, Ronald Numbers, always careful to differentiate among the strands of creationism, also allowed himself to arrive at such a generalization. It suffices to consult a chapter of his book *The Creationists* which is entitled "Creationism goes global." Cf. Ronald Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*, Expanded Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 399–431.

## WHO DO CREATIONISTS SEE AS THEIR ADVERSARIES?

I will begin with the document entitled *The “Wedge Document”: So What?*, prepared by the Discovery Institute<sup>5</sup> in 2005, and which, today, is still considered to be the most enduring programmatic synthesis of the creationist doctrine’s objectives. It is worth paying attention to the preferred adversary chosen by the text; it is not just Darwinism, but the line of thought that is considered its matrix:

The social consequences of materialism have been devastating. As symptoms, those consequences are certainly worth treating. However, we are convinced that in order to defeat materialism, we must cut it off at its source. That source is scientific materialism.<sup>6</sup>

Materialism is thus considered the main cause of contemporary misfortunes. A more careful perusal of the writings of creationist leaders reveals that they make what philosophers would call a causal imputation. That is, they attribute a varied set of characteristics of the current world to a specific cause. This cause has the name of scientific materialism, understood as a worldview that supposedly managed to hegemonically impose itself on society: “This materialistic conception of reality eventually infected virtually every area of our culture, from politics and economics to literature and art.”<sup>7</sup> From a creationist point of view, already secular social processes such as the rise of individualism, the loss of prestige of the family as the basic social unit, exacerbated consumerism, the increase in the number of divorces, the corruption involving different instances of constituted power, the growth of urban violence and, very symptomatically, the existence even today of followers of a socialist political project, all of these are phenomena to be attributed to the predominance of a

<sup>5</sup> The Discovery Institute is a think tank notable for the dissemination of creationism and the set of values associated with it. Based in Seattle, Washington, it was described by the tracking site NNDB (*Notable Names Database*) as follows: “Founded by Reagan-era bureaucrat Bruce Chapman and funded by conservatives Howard Ahmanson, Jr., Philip Anschutz, and Richard Scaife, the Discovery Institute is an umbrella organization dedicated to restructuring American government without any separation between church and state.” NNDB, ‘Discovery Institute’, accessed 27 July 2013, <http://www.nndb.com/org/587/000053428>.

<sup>6</sup> Discovery Institute, ‘The “Wedge Document”: So What?’, 3 July 2005, 13, <https://www.discovery.org/m/2019/04/Wedge-Document-So-What.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 12.

materialistic perspective. When the time comes to name the most significant representatives of this perspective, three authors emerge with greater prominence:

Debunking the traditional conceptions of both God and man, thinkers such as Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud portrayed humans not as moral and spiritual beings, but as animals or machines who inhabited a universe ruled by purely impersonal forces and whose behavior and very thoughts were dictated by the unbending forces of biology, chemistry, and environment.<sup>8</sup>

The conceptions of Darwin, Marx and Freud are considered to have corroded the moral foundations of societal life. In a very peculiar interpretation of these authors—indeed, clearly mistaken—the creationists claim that they removed the sense of responsibility proper to each human being. The materialist worldview is considered to have expelled basic notions like the moral imperative that each one of us should have to obey the Creator. In its place, the idea of a cosmos ruled by anonymous material forces gained prominence. From this diagnosis, the authors of *The Wedge* propose a coordinated action to radiate their own values. Coordinated action, because this is a movement of ideas that intends to expand, in capillary fashion, throughout society as a whole. In his writings, the mathematician and theologian William Dembski—one of the exponents of intelligent design—explicitly asserts that defenders of Christianity must:

We are to engage the secular world, reproofing, rebuking and exhorting it, pointing to the truth of Christianity and producing strong arguments and valid criticisms that show where secularism has missed the mark.<sup>9</sup>

In a more general sense, the objective is to reclaim the centrality of religion, putatively dethroned by the materialist paradigm. The rejection of Darwinism is inscribed in precisely this way. It is seen as an essentially materialist and atheist line of thought, disallowing classical religious accounts of the creation of the world, and, as such, undermining the foundations of societal life.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>9</sup> William Dembski, 'The Task of Apologetics', in *Unapologetic Apologetics*, ed. William Dembski and Jay Richards (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 15.

Before proceeding with this analysis, it will be necessary to confront a conceptual question: Are the creationists correct in supposing that the embrace of Darwinism is necessarily a sign of atheism? This question, which appears secondary, will in truth better define the exact tone of the creationist discourse. To do this it is helpful to go back in time and recall an excerpt from Darwin's extensive correspondence. In 1879, John Fordyce wrote a letter to Darwin mentioning the clergyman and professor Charles Kingsley as an example of the possibility for reconciling the theory of evolution with his religious views. In his reply Darwin endorsed the possibility Fordyce mentioned, and added the name of the botanist Asa Gray as another example. He then wrote, referring to himself: "What my own views may be is a question of no consequence to anyone except myself. – But as you ask, I may state that my judgment often fluctuates."<sup>10</sup>

Examination of the current relationship between the biological sciences and religions seems to confirm Darwin's assessment. It is possible to find in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries very distinct positions with regard to religion within the community of evolutionary biologists, ranging from staunch atheists to religious practitioners. In the first group, we find names like Richard Dawkins (a prominent pro-atheist activist), as well as Stephen Jay Gould and Ernst Mayr, who died in 2002 and 2005, respectively, after successful academic careers. The second group includes Kenneth Miller, a practicing Christian, which did not prevent the atheist Richard Dawkins from asserting that Miller is "the most persuasive nemesis of 'intelligent design'."<sup>11</sup> Not to mention the illustrious example of Theodosius Dobzhansky, widely recognized as one of the most important evolutionists of the twentieth century, but who maintained explicit ties to Orthodox Christianity.

Such examples show that, both in historical terms and in the contemporary world, it is possible to find different compositions of evolutionism and religious thought. However, when it comes to the relationship between Darwinists and creationists, a composition of this nature proved

<sup>10</sup> Charles Darwin, 'Letter to John Fordyce, 7 May 1879', in *Darwin Correspondence Project* (University of Cambridge, 2021), <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/?docId=letters/DCP-LETT-12041.xml>. At the end of his life, Darwin often called himself an agnostic. More details on Darwin's position on religion can be found in Chapter 7 of this book.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 131; Kenneth Miller, *Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007).

to be unfeasible, and it is worth examining the reason why. It relates to Darwin's own refusal to take the biblical account literally. In the words of *On the Origin of Species*: "species are produced and exterminated by slowly acting and still existing causes, and not by miraculous acts of creation [...]." <sup>12</sup>

In other words: present and past evolutionists who maintained their religious beliefs (T. Dobzhansky, K. Maxwell, or Francisco Ayala) chose to interpret in a metaphorical, not literal sense, the biblical passages that clash with their research in the life sciences. This procedure consists of a *subjectivation of faith*; it involves a considerable loosening of the classical canon of interpretation of the founding texts of a religion. A long-term process, this subjectivation is far from simple. It took centuries of an uneven historical course to admit such a possibility, which only emerges accompanied by broader phenomena of secularization in the scope of civil society. Creationists reject the affirmation that various biblical passages must be interpreted metaphorically. They cling to the literalness of the biblical text as the source of truth, hence the intensity of their rejection of Darwinism as a line of thought that shakes their worldview by the roots.

From a doctrinal perspective, creationists are, therefore, characterized by an attachment to the letter of the Bible as an unquestionable account of reality. The importance that a prestigious religious narrative occupies in a given society cannot be overemphasized. It is not only a theoretical account; within it one also finds a way to confront the constant demands of a practical world: there are numerous moral prescriptions in the biblical text, like the Ten Commandments. This is not only true for Christianity: Islam calls the great monotheistic religions "religions of the Book", in reference to the importance that they place upon a written document—in addition to oral tradition—that unites the doctrinal aspects to be followed. Even today, people of faith are frequently found who, in a moment of doubt or debate about the correct procedure to be followed, point to an excerpt of a religious text and say with conviction: "it is written here." Aware of these characteristics, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman asserts that "[religion] legislates in no uncertain terms about

<sup>12</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 427.



every aspect of life, thereby unloading the burden of responsibility lying heavily on the individual's shoulders [...]."<sup>13</sup>

This brief digression allows a better understanding of the characteristics of the creationists' attacks on Darwinism. Since they find the questioning of the biblical account made by the theory of evolution to be unacceptable, a call arises for a surgical *Wedge strategy* to cut and fissure both evolutionism and materialism.

If we view the predominant materialistic science as a giant tree, our strategy is intended to function as a "wedge" that, while relatively small, can split the trunk when applied at its weakest points. The very beginning of this strategy, the "thin edge of the wedge," was Phillip Johnson's critique of Darwinism [...] Michael Behe's highly successful *Darwin's Black Box* followed Johnson's work.<sup>14</sup>

The reference to Michael Behe's book, *Darwin's Black Box* (which will be analyzed in more detail in the next chapter), points to the most sophisticated version of creationism, the so-called intelligent design. This version won adherents among professors who obtained their PhDs in fields such as biology, biochemistry or even mathematics. In their pronouncements to a wider public, these professionals often refuse the name "creationist." They present themselves as followers of intelligent design, a supposedly scientific movement that invokes alleged advances in biochemistry as indisputable refutations of Darwinism. But the fact remains that, in texts produced for the more limited public of their followers, such as the aforementioned programmatic document *The Wedge*, there is a clear correspondence of perspectives between intelligent design and creationism:

We are building on this momentum, broadening the wedge with a positive scientific alternative to materialistic scientific theories, which has come to be called the theory of intelligent design (ID). Design theory promises to reverse the stifling dominance of the materialist worldview, and to replace it with a science consonant with Christian and theistic convictions.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 185.

<sup>14</sup> Discovery Institute, "The 'Wedge Document'", 13–14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

As for representatives of intelligent design, there are several names to note: in addition to William Dembski and Michael Behe, Percival Davis and Dean H. Kenyon also gained notoriety with the book *Of Pandas and People*, published in 1989 and offering criticisms of the theory of evolution for young students. A textual analysis of the works produced by these authors reveals not only their complete lack of a research program in the life sciences, but also their immersion in a religious doctrine that furnishes the ultimate guarantee for their statements. To offer one example: eschewing any research of the origin of complex biochemical systems, Michael Behe simply declares that they were *planned*: “the straightforward conclusion is that many biochemical systems were designed [...]. The designer knew what the systems would look like when they were completed, then took steps to bring the systems about.”<sup>16</sup> Evidently, what must be asked is: but who is the “designer” of intelligent design, if not the obstinate God of Judeo-Christian theology?<sup>17</sup>

This structural affinity between creationism and intelligent design, identified in the 1990s by researchers in the life sciences, received an important judicial reinforcement in 2005 in response to the legal dispute known as *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*. At the time, eleven parents of students protested against the inclusion in the Dover Area School District’s science classes of the book *Of Pandas and People*. The book asserts that intelligent design is a more solid explanation of the origin of species than Darwin’s theory of evolution. After hearing the parties, Judge John E. Jones III concluded in his decision that “the writings of leading ID [Intelligent Design] proponents reveal that the designer postulated by their argument is the God of Christianity.”<sup>18</sup> Invoking the First Amendment of the US Constitution (which establishes the separation of church and state, and prevents the preferential adoption of a given religion), the judge ruled in favor of the students’ parents. The decision in the *Kitzmiller v. Dover* case is considered a benchmark in the defense of secular teaching in the United States, but it certainly did not end the efforts of intelligent design proponents to propagate their ideas.

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 193.

<sup>17</sup> I analyze M. Behe’s book in greater detail in Chapter 10 of this book.

<sup>18</sup> *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*, 400 F. Supp. 2d 707 (M.D. Pa. 2005). The full decision of judge Jones III is available at: <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp2/400/707/2414073/>.

One of the most extensive and well-documented studies on the historical origin and characteristics of the creationist movement can be found in Ronald Numbers' book, *The Creationists*, first published in 1992. A long-practicing Christian from a religious family, Numbers has a solid understanding of the different strands of creationism. In the 2006 edition of his book, Numbers included two additional chapters that are very instructive for the thesis examined here. One is dedicated precisely to the emergence of intelligent design, correctly positioned as a development of creationism itself. The other new chapter addresses the movement's globalization. Until recently, the doctrine was seen as a typically US movement, related to singular aspects of the nation. But history has shown that—if certain prerequisites are met—local phenomena can reach a broader scope; this is precisely what happened with the international diffusion of creationism. The second part of this chapter will discuss this internationalization, considering the characteristics of the contemporary world that made it possible. This will require turning our attention from the purely doctrinal debate to examine the social processes that generate it.<sup>19</sup>

The working hypothesis adopted here consists of considering the internal analysis of the creationist discourse within the social context where this discourse proliferates. The hypothesis is inspired by a procedure used by Marx—while recognizing the evident historical differences—in a text from his youth that analyzes a religious phenomenon: *On the Jewish Question*, Marx examines the longevity of the Jewish religion throughout history, among other issues. Despite the limits of his youthful writing—which is still very far from the great elaborations of his maturity—Marx offers theoretical and methodological lessons in the text that are worth retaining. His refusal to think of religions as having their own essence capable of traversing history stands out in the approach. One incisive moment in the text states that “Judaism continues to exist not in spite of history, but owing to history.”<sup>20</sup> Here, the anti-essentialist perspective is bruising: unlike Bruno Bauer (with whom the text polemizes), Marx's emphasis is on the current societal configuration, and not

<sup>19</sup> Despite the seriousness of Ronald Numbers' work, he does not analyze the *social causes* of the globalization of creationism. In his book, the reader will find a predominately descriptive account of the process.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', in *MECW*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 171.

on a supposed religious essence that carries a timeless distinctive trait. *On the Jewish Question* shows that both Judaism and Christianity are permeated by the commodified relations between civil society and the state, characteristic of contemporary capitalist society.

Bringing this stance to an analysis of creationism, it can be seen that it also, even in its obstinate refusal of modern values, emerged as a reactive product of modernity. The word *reactive* deserves special emphasis here. Creationism reacts to worldly determinations by operating a series of displacements and distortions in the understanding of the causes that produce them. Prominent among these causes are the characteristics of an internationalized world that does not authorize the isolation of the religious revival generated from within. It is precisely this internationalized world that now needs to be further elaborated.

### THE GLOBALIZATION OF CREATIONISM AND INTELLIGENT DESIGN

Researchers of globalization face an apparent paradox. On the one hand, the phenomenon was presented in the 1970s by its expounders in the media and even in university circles as the definitive entry into an advanced modernity that would leave behind old structural problems confronted by the different nations. The end of national economic barriers, the development of new electronic technologies, encouraging free circulation of capital and privatization of public institutions were together heralded as precursors of a period of greater equity in social relations. However, after the implementation of the measures prescribed by international economic bodies (especially the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), the expansion of mechanisms responsible for the concentration of wealth, for poverty and unequal access to opportunities for education and social well-being soon became apparent. It is not even necessary to adopt a Marxist perspective to attest to the worsening of these problems; United Nations reports point in the same direction. In a speech in 2020, U.N. Secretary General António Guterres stated bluntly that “Inequality defines our time.” According to the transcript of his lecture published on the U.N. website:

High levels of inequality are associated with economic instability, corruption, financial crises, increased crime and poor physical and mental health. [...] Between 1980 and 2016, the world’s richest 1 per cent captured 27

per cent of the total cumulative growth in income. [...] Deep disparities begin before birth and define lives – and early deaths.<sup>21</sup>

The position of the United States in this international context should be analyzed with due caution. Before outlining some of the country's striking objective conditions, it is worth emphasizing a persistent trait in the space of mentalities: the recurring belief in US exceptionality. Presidents with distinct ideological profiles, such as John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama, refer to America as a "shining city upon a hill," revisiting words from a famous sermon by John Winthrop, delivered in 1630. The sermon supported the Puritan commitment to a new civilization that would flourish on American soil. According to the analysis of researchers Elizabeth Watts and Ulrich Kutschera:

Since Christianity postulated that humans were the crown of creation, evangelical ministers and politicians throughout American history claimed that Americans not only represented the "top species" of creation, but God's chosen people.<sup>22</sup>

However, this age-old affirmation of an exceptional society, a model to be followed by other nations, coexists in real life with very harsh conditions for most American citizens. The United States certainly continues to be sought by large waves of immigrants: the frequently occurring dramatic episodes involving illegal immigrants on the Mexican border give eloquent testimony to the power of attraction that the US labor market exerts over workers from numerous countries. But it would be naïve to suppose that they will find the Eldorado promised by the cultural imaginary. Far from it. It wasn't only after the 2008 financial crisis that American workers began to face more serious problems with their living conditions. In addition to the obvious example of the great crisis of 1929, it should be emphasized that even in economic cycles of greater prosperity, the distribution of wealth was always extremely unequal. The image

<sup>21</sup> UN Secretary-General, 'Secretary-General's Nelson Mandela Lecture: "Tackling the Inequality Pandemic: A New Social Contract for a New Era" [as Delivered]', 18 July 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-07-18/secretary-generals-nelson-mandela-lecture-%E2%80%9CTackling-the-inequality-pandemic-new-social-contract-for-new-era%E2%80%9D-delivered>.

<sup>22</sup> Watts and Kutschera, 'On the Historical Roots of Creationism and Intelligent Design'.

of an open society that enables processes of social ascension is only a reality for a minority of the population. Social climbers—individuals who ascend the societal structure—traditionally have their life stories publicized and amplified in mainstream media, providing constantly updated visibility. However, for every success story, a legion of the dispossessed remain in obscurity. In his 1974 book analyzing the degradation of work in the twentieth century, not coincidentally did Harry Braverman choose for his epigraph the lines of Bertolt Brecht: “Some there are who live in darkness / While the others live in light / We see those who live in daylight / Those in darkness, out of sight.”<sup>23</sup>

Long before Braverman’s analysis of twentieth-century working conditions in the United States, classic literary works examined the living conditions of those who are, in Brecht’s words, “out of sight.” They include, among others, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) by John Steinbeck, a harsh picture of the effects of the Great Depression of 1929 on rural American workers, and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller, a biting criticism of the illusions assimilated by those who believe it is possible to ascend in an “open society” through incessant work. What the literary sensibility of some prominent authors acutely detected has been confirmed for decades by sociological research attesting to the harsh living conditions of the more disfavored classes in US society. Even in the middle class, in the last third of the twentieth century, progressive indebtedness is the rule: “hidden behind suburban houses, explicit in divorce agreements [...], consumer debts flourish.”<sup>24</sup>

The harshness of the US model of society is also well known through films: part of this production includes notoriously violent movies, generating effects in reality itself that in turn trigger chronically unresolved debates on the limits of freedom of expression. Indeed, when the subject is levels of violence in the United States, the ease of access to firearms in the country cannot be ignored. Studies on the issue include the classic *The Established and the Outsiders*, by sociologists Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson.

<sup>23</sup> Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Teresa Sullivan, Elizabeth Warren, and Jay L. Westbrook, ‘Una Prosperidad Precaria: La Inseguridad Financiera de la Clase Media’, in *Repensar los Estados Unidos*, ed. Loïc Wacquant (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2005), 40.

As a German researcher based in the United Kingdom, Elias had a penetrating view into the striking differences between England and the United States. One of these is the absence in the United States of a state monopoly on violence,<sup>25</sup> as found in England. As a consequence, the white civilian population has historically armed itself in an exercise of violent oppression that mainly (but certainly not exclusively) afflicts the Black population. To revise Elias' reflections for the present day, it is necessary to say that the branches of US industry that produce firearms need to incessantly dump their massive production on the market, generating a continuous impetus for the population to arm itself. With each cyclical massacre of students in schools in the country, there is a resurgence of protests by civil society groups opposed to easy access to firearms. So far, however, these protests have been neutralized by industry lobbies, most notably the National Rifle Association (NRA).

In short, the causes for indignation about the country's current reality are more than abundant: *indignation that appears, transfigured, in the creationist documents cited at the beginning of this chapter*. An extremely competitive labor environment, exacerbated individualism, accentuated fragmentation of the family unit, high rates of violence, above average working hours compared to other developed countries (a theme examined in 1993 by Juliet Schor in *The Overworked American*<sup>26</sup>): all are striking features of US society, coexisting with the formation of impressive fortunes in the hands of the world's wealthiest tycoons.

Regarding the presence of religion in civil society, the United States is always referred to as having a unique synthesis of capitalist practices with a proliferation of religious movements, a synthesis emblematically stamped on US currency bearing the inscription: "In God We Trust." Historically, resistance to Darwinism takes root in the poorest states of the union, where the violence of capitalist accumulation finds an unintentional counterpart in various types of religious preaching. This is the

<sup>25</sup> Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *Os Estabelecidos e Os Outsiders* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2000), 206. The reference here is to the Afterword of the 1990 German edition of the book, translated to English as "Further Facets of Established – Outsider Relationships: The Maycomb Model."

<sup>26</sup> Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

social substance—presented here in very general terms—that the creationists refer to when they assert that the effects of materialism are devastating and spread throughout society.

The followers of the doctrine yearn for a return to the supposed state of exceptionality, which they claim was removed from the country by the predominance of the materialist paradigm. But note that this is not an argument of intentionality. I do not claim that a particular religious growth has the intentional goal of adapting to a given situation: to affirm this would be to invite a reductionist sociology of science, supposing that there is something like a Machiavellian brain commanding heterogeneous historical processes. Richard Dawkins ironizes with purposeful exaggeration those explanations that claim that “Religion is a tool used by the ruling class to subjugate the underclass.”<sup>27</sup>

Instead of being an ends-oriented process (occurring “with the purpose of”), what we have is a certain structural configuration, formed beyond the will of conscious agents. This configuration permits the emergence of religious discourses—with their promises of a blissful future—from a very restrictive earthly reality. Another decisive caveat should be added: when I maintain that the social terrain suitable for creationist pathos can be found among the more disadvantaged social groups, this does not mean that this movement’s leaders necessarily belong to these groups. Social theory has long demonstrated that there is a marked asymmetry between the distinguished representatives of a movement (recruited from among those who have greater access to education, with greater material and symbolic capital) and its broader social base.<sup>28</sup>

To advance this analysis, it should be recalled that although the United States is a concentrated portrait of an extremely commodified society, tendencies analogous to those mentioned above can be found today across nearly the entire globe (of course with substantial national differences, to be studied on a case-by-case basis). Considering this

<sup>27</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 169. Dawkins’ irony does not, however, prevent him from slipping into biological reductionism in some passages of this book. In his words: “Perhaps Islam is analogous to a carnivorous gene complex, Buddhism to a herbivorous one.” Ibid., 200. A vast set of economic, social and cultural causes of different religions is leveled here in favor of a supposed genetic determinism.

<sup>28</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *A Economia das Trocas Simbólicas* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1974), 183–202.



internationalized reality, Zygmunt Bauman wrote the already cited *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (1997), a title that pays homage to the Freudian classic *Civilization and Its Discontents*. The Polish sociologist assumes the task of updating the debate about the numerous symptoms produced in a world where an oppressive present seems eternal. Whereas in the Freudian approach the emphasis was on problems of discontent caused by a continuously repressed libido, Bauman highlights the frailty of the social bonds established in so-called postmodernity. When different spheres of contemporary experience are examined, we see that long-term projects are continually bombarded by the urgencies of an increasingly fast-paced daily life. This applies to emotional and professional relationships, and even to new modes of religious adherence, which also come under the aegis of volatile relationships. The strengthening of contemporary creationisms should be viewed precisely within this broader context of discontentment. They are a form of religious fundamentalism and, as such, share the reactive characteristics of extreme rejection of a certain prevailing reality. In its place, they propose a return to an idealized former state, under the strict dominion of religious norms of conduct. Since the creationists are not a self-sufficient island, it should be noted that they:

belong to a wider family of postmodern responses to those postmodern fears which have been visited upon the individuals qua individuals by the progressive deregulation and privatization of all 'secular' insurance/protection nets, once state-provided through the entitlements of state citizenship.<sup>29</sup>

Bauman emphasizes the deleterious effects produced by the neoliberal order as the background responsible for the contemporary discontent. There is a generalized crisis of the notion of belonging, specifically of belonging to a collective (be it social, political, or professional): what prevails are extremely fleeting and transitory relationships. In this sense, *it would be a mistake to consider creationism as a holdover from the past*, which will be surpassed by a new cycle of economic and social development. Quite the contrary: it expresses our contemporary situation, with all its contradictions. Recognizing the diversity of reactions to a context of discontent in contemporary culture enables a better understanding of an already classic Gallup poll in the United States, which asserts that:

<sup>29</sup> Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, 184.

Three-quarters of Catholics and Protestants could not name a single Old Testament prophet. More than two-thirds didn't know who preached the Sermon on the Mount. A substantial number thought that Moses was one of Jesus's twelve apostles.<sup>30</sup>

This data reveals that most of the American population has very scant knowledge of Christianity, the nation's majority religion. Apparently incidental, these findings illuminate a relevant dimension of the phenomenon in focus. They reiterate that, despite the widespread religious reputation of the United States, the predominant part of its population is involved secularly with a different worldview conveying values related to a highly accentuated pragmatism. It is precisely these values that the creationists criticize. They protest against their existence, attributing their origin to materialism in general, and to Darwinism in particular. Strictly speaking, creationism represents a very specific segment of American society—a minority segment—but one that gained visibility due to alliances established by some of its leaders with powerful political groups, which include supporters of the most conservative sectors of the society. In this way, great monetary resources were obtained to conduct intense activism in favor of a society where religious values will have a central position in societal life. The propitious arena for the strengthening of this doctrine—now under the new guise of intelligent design—can be found in the long period that began with the hegemony of the Republican Party in the Reagan administration, continued during the Bush period (father and son), and is now found in the Discovery Institute, a contemporary center for the international dissemination of its ideology.

<sup>30</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 341.

## BRIEF CONSIDERATIONS ON CREATIONISM IN BRAZIL

“I don’t believe in the evolution of species. It’s all theory”

Rosinha Garotinho<sup>31</sup>

Let us now briefly examine some aspects of creationist doctrine in Brazil. By considering the issue of globalization, it can be seen that the contradictions mentioned are now global, albeit with important national and regional differences. Religious movements were not excluded from this global expansion.

While the story of creationists in the United States has been well researched, its detailed reconstitution in Latin America and Brazil has yet to be done. The data available so far shows that the doctrine’s presence in Brazil is more strongly expressed in evangelical segments of the population—precisely those that have grown the most in recent years—which does not mean that it is exclusive to these segments. Brazil now has two creationist societies, the Associação Brasileira de Pesquisa da Criação [Brazilian Creation Research Association] and the Sociedade Criacionista Brasileira [Brazilian Creationist Society]. The phenomenon is so striking that, though not a specialist on Brazilian society, Ronald Numbers’ keen eye accurately noted: “Nowhere in South America did antievolutionists make deeper inroads than in Brazil.”<sup>32</sup>

In the educational system, traditional institutions such as the Colégio Mackenzie in São Paulo acknowledge that creationist perspective is adopted even in science classes, where the diversity of species is presented not as a result of evolution but rather as representing the wisdom of God.<sup>33</sup> Also at Mackenzie, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, books in the life sciences were substituted with texts produced by the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), with all of the regressive implications that a substitution of this order entails, confirming,

<sup>31</sup> Apud Elisa Martins and Valéria França, ‘Rosinha contra Darwin: Governo do Rio de Janeiro Institui Aulas que Questionam a Evolução das Espécies’, *Época*, 24 May 2004, <http://revistaepoca.globo.com/Epoca/0,6993,EPT731549-1664-1,00.html>. Rosinha Garotinho was Governor of the Brazilian state of Rio de Janeiro from 2003 to 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Numbers, *The Creationists*, 417.

<sup>33</sup> Marcelo Leite, ‘Criacionismo no Mackenzie’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 30 November 2008, Caderno Mais!, 9.

moreover, the globalization of creationism. In higher education, the Centro Universitário Adventista de São Paulo-UNASP [São Paulo Adventist University Center] stands out for regularly promoting encounters with international guests to spread its doctrine and, of course, attack evolutionists.

This is a phenomenon ripe with meaning. At first, an attempt at imitation of United States is notable; a mimicry that notoriously also occurs in several other countries. It was not just the Statue of Liberty, one of the symbols of United States, that was displayed in miniature in a shopping center in Rio de Janeiro: an ideological religious system was also exported from one country to various others. But how to explain the dissemination of an originally American doctrine on Brazilian soil? To answer this question, it is necessary to consider the reasons for the growth of different forms of Protestantism in Brazil (from the most traditional to Pentecostalism). While Presbyterianism, represented by Mackenzie, caters to a more privileged segment of the population, the same is not true when we examine the more general expansion of Pentecostalism. The latter focuses on the most disadvantaged classes in the country, exposed to the brutality of capital accumulation. In the words of Regina Novaes, a Brazilian researcher who has studied the subject for many years:

If it is true that Brazilian Pentecostalism doesn't only grow among the lower classes [...], it is in the poor areas where Pentecostal churches spread the most [...]. To which is added structural unemployment, whose effects are accentuated in urban areas where there is a lack of school institutions and health policies. *It is within this scenario that religious conversion stands out.*<sup>34</sup>

The push for religious conversion, coming from the more general social structure, affects social classes unequally: from the middle classes that furnish the clients of Mackenzie and the Centro Universitário Adventista—which obviously are not immune to the effects of the overarching social structure—to the impoverished population of northern Rio de

<sup>34</sup> Regina Novaes, 'Crenças Religiosas e Convicções Políticas', in *Política e Cultura: Século XXI*, ed. Luis Carlos Fridman (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2002), 80, my emphasis.

Janeiro, who found in the political couple Anthony and Rosinha Garotinho the expression of their demands.<sup>35</sup> Particularly reprehensible in their case was the hiring of religious instructors—despite a deficit of science teachers—to teach in public schools in the north of the state, the electoral base of the Garotinhos and their followers.<sup>36</sup>

Regarding the Brazilian social context, it is impossible not to mention the unbelievably high rates of urban violence, which exceed those of some countries in a state of civil war:

Records from the Ministry of Health's Subsystem of Information on Mortality indicate that, between 1980 and 2010, nearly 800,000 citizens died from some type of gunfire.<sup>37</sup>

The loss of 800,000 Brazilian lives in a period of thirty years raises additional questions. The same social reality can generate very different responses from the classes that constitute it, but these responses take root in the same context of extreme violence and impoverishment. Analyzing historical reactions to a reality of weakening traditional rules and an impoverishment of the most vulnerable segments of society, the historian William McNeill asserts that *religious sects* and *violent gangs* are contrasting responses to the same situation,<sup>38</sup> as disconcerting as this may initially seem. Symptomatic of situations that are particularly difficult to face, religious growth is a particular expression of the search for a language to deal with acute unresolved tensions.

This brief outline of the contemporary social context would be incomplete if it did not make reference to the international crisis of an alternative political project. Political project is understood here in the broadest sense of the term, as a life project, of relations among human beings. There is

<sup>35</sup> Anthony and Rosinha Garotinho are a couple and politicians who were each Governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro. Anthony Garotinho held the office from 1999 to 2002; Rosinha Garotinho from 2003 to 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Also noteworthy is the incidence of the word *Satan* used in the discourse of this political group to designate their opponents, characterizing a regressive amalgam between religion and politics that should be repudiated by any democratic worldview.

<sup>37</sup> Julio J. Waiselfisz, *Mapa Da Violência 2013: Mortes Matadas Por Armas de Fogo* (Brasil: Cebela/Flacso, 2013), 9, [http://mapadaviolencia.org.br/pdf2013/MapaViolencia2013\\_armas.pdf](http://mapadaviolencia.org.br/pdf2013/MapaViolencia2013_armas.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> William McNeill, 'A História da Violência Urbana', in *Insegurança Pública*, ed. Nilson V. Oliveira (São Paulo: Nova Alexandria, 2002), 22.

no doubt that the opposition between capitalist society and the alternative socialist project—whatever position is adopted regarding the subject—is fundamental to any understanding, in structural terms, of the history of the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup> This opposition is crucial for the comprehension not just of the internal politics of different countries, but also the current international configuration during most of the last century. The multiplication of socialist political parties (as well as active social movements and their demands) can help understand the rise of the welfare state, a compromise solution in which the working classes and their political parties relinquished a claim to more profound transformations, obtaining in exchange certain gains in their entry into the system. Acknowledging this fact obviously does not mean closing one's eyes to the serious distortions that have occurred in countries of so-called real socialism. It merely means discerning that the presence of a significant group of states that declared themselves socialists constituted a fundamental trait for understanding of the history of the twentieth century.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the crisis of the socialist political project became a phenomenon with vast repercussions for recent history. With this crisis, the hegemony of the capitalist *modus operandi* was proclaimed as the sole possibility: conditions were given for the predominance of extreme competition between individuals and social classes. Sectors that adhere to fundamentalist religions find in them a language that expresses their concerns about these conditions. There are recurring stories of believers who claim to have found comfort for their different problems in religious adherence.<sup>40</sup> This is the context for the emergence of a discourse that provides its faithful with simple and strong statements: God created the world and man and woman in seven days; the good will be rewarded and the bad will be punished; the Bible should be adopted as the text that provides the rules of daily conduct; atheists and heretics will not find salvation, etc.

To overcome this obscurantist panorama, the (necessary) educational activities of professors, scientists, and their allies are not enough. The

<sup>39</sup> At the end of his life, György Lukács strongly emphasized the importance of considering the conflict between capitalism and socialism for an understanding not only of the economic characteristics of the twentieth century, but also of several of its cultural manifestations. György Lukács, *Para Uma Ontologia do Ser Social*, vol. 2 (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2013), 820–25.

<sup>40</sup> Novaes, 'Crenças Religiosas e Convicções Políticas', 81.

hypothesis that an educational deficit is the principal cause of the strengthening of creationism is weak: the representatives of intelligent design are PhDs in their respective fields of knowledge. In addition to a substantive democratization of the educational system, transformations are needed that can check the spread of the mercantile logic of value that expands across the globe (at the cost of expropriations, growing impoverishment for most of the population and environmental devastation).

Finally, to more precisely visualize the virulence of the creationist thought addressed in this chapter, we turn to the words of William Dembski, one of its most visible international exponents in the media. In the midst of other conservative gems, he defends the contemporary relevance of the concept of *heresy*:

Within late twentieth-century North American Christianity, heresy has become an unpopular word. Can't we all just get along and live together in peace? Unfortunately, no. Peace cannot be purchased at the expense of truth [...] and heresy remains a valid category for today.<sup>41</sup>

Anxious to have his doctrine included in school curricula to defend the “inviolable core to the Christian faith,” Dembski declares that all those who think differently have committed *heresy*. This is an unadulterated portrait of intelligent design, the supposedly scientific version of creationism: a retrograde religious doctrine, lacking in any research program, that invokes the Bible as a guarantee of the dogmas that it wants to transmit to its adherents. In the field of science, controversies are welcome when they are accredited as such and stimulate their practitioners to engage in debate. In the realm of intelligent design, differences in thought are summarily judged as heretical.<sup>42</sup> For all these reasons, it can be seen that, by contrast, only a more generous societal project opposing this exclusionary logic can encourage men and women to think and act with their own minds. This is a qualitatively different stance from the uncritical adherence to a religious text, which exempts its practitioners from examining the ethical and moral presuppositions of their worldly choices.

<sup>41</sup> Dembski, ‘The Task of Apologetics’, 43.

<sup>42</sup> Echoing Dembski’s words, Michael Behe asserts that the Darwinian theory of evolution “should be banished.” Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box*, 186.

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## “The Spirit of Spiritless Conditions”: Religious Growth in the Contemporary World

“He who possesses science and art also has religion; but he who possesses neither of those two, let him have religion!”. These ironic words from a poem by Goethe expressed his expectation of the liberating potential of the arts and sciences. More than a hundred years later, the simultaneously emancipatory and scathing content of Goethe’s verses did not go unnoticed by Sigmund Freud, who quoted them in his work *Civilization and Its Discontents*<sup>1</sup> as a clear example of what he supposed to be the effectiveness of scientific discourse in combating religious beliefs. Although they lived in very different historical periods, Goethe and Freud shared the assumption that the progressive development of the sciences and arts would reduce the space for religious beliefs. Those who have access to the “treasures of knowledge,” wrote Freud in *The Future of an Illusion*, would no longer need the old “neurotic relics”<sup>2</sup> represented by religious teachings.

<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *Zahme Xenien IX*, apud Sigmund Freud, ‘Civilization and Its Discontents’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXI (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), 74.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Future of an Illusion’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXI (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), 38 and 44.

Despite the greatness of these two thinkers, the contemporary world presents us with a situation very different from their expectations. Religious movements of many different types are growing across the world.<sup>3</sup> And they are joined by educated groups in different populations in various countries, even individuals with PhDs. This adherence creates difficulties for the hypothesis that the search for religion is due to a deficit in access to education. It is necessary to investigate other causes that explain why, for example, even in an economic power like the United States there are still legal disputes because religious groups seek to include the teaching of their beliefs in public schools.

As is well known, creationism is the doctrine that repudiates Darwin's theses about the origin of species, proposing in its place a literal acceptance of the account found in the biblical book of Genesis. Its representatives frequently seek out the media claiming to have found definitive and insurmountable errors in Darwin's thinking. Not even the rise of new variants of the coronavirus by natural selection in the current COVID-19 pandemic—living proof of the actuality of Darwin's thinking—is able to shake their negationist intent.

This chapter has at least two distinct objectives. The first is to analyze some of the ideational characteristics of the creationist discourse to understand how it is structured and the appeal it exercises on its followers. In terms of this analysis, a good rule of hermeneutics is that in a debate about a certain theoretical conception, we should choose not its simplified version, but, on the contrary, the most complex elaboration of this conception produced. Indeed, it would be facile to criticize creationism in its overtly theological versions, easily caricatured in their speculations, for example, about exactly which animals found shelter on Noah's Ark. A more difficult task, however, is to examine one of the most elaborate creationist texts circulating in the marketplace of ideas: Michael Behe's book *Darwin's Black Box*, originally published in 1996 in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Behe, a biochemist who teaches at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, argues that the theory of evolution presented by Darwin is not supported

<sup>3</sup> A comprehensive and detailed database on this religious growth can be found in: Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim, eds. *World Religion Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022). This database covers various religions around the world, with continuously updated data from censuses and surveys.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

by the most recent discoveries in biochemistry. He presents himself not as a creationist, but as a defender of intelligent design.<sup>5</sup> This chapter intends to buttress, in its own way, the arguments of those researchers who have already made it clear that what Behe proposes is indeed a religiously motivated rejection of Darwin's theory. The reader will also find that *Darwin's Black Box* is not of interest here as an end in itself, but rather as an indication of what some authors have called a *re-enchantment of the world*,<sup>6</sup> a complex process that generates different effects according to the society and social strata where it occurs.

The second objective of this chapter is to discuss the social and historical causes responsible for this return to religious discourse, even in different sectors of the academic community. Although Darwinism is hegemonic among university specialists, it must be said that creationism has been increasing its pressure on educational institutions. This is a change from the 1970s, when it was possible to distinguish the more educated sectors of the population, which absorbed Darwin's theory at a pragmatic level (maintaining any religious convictions in a separate sphere), and the more impoverished sectors, traditionally hostile to Darwinism, particularly in the United States. As seen in the previous chapter, the legal suit known as *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* raises additional questions for an understanding of the issue. In this lawsuit, filed in 2005, parents of public school students opposed the inclusion of a creationist textbook into the science curriculum, as had been proposed by the local school board. In other words, it is not only church denominations questioning the master of the evolutionists, but educational representatives of public schools, supposedly secular institutions. The judge's ruling in favor of the parents notwithstanding (in a victory for teaching evolutionism), the process as a whole revealed a phenomenon that deserves more careful attention.

To reach these objectives, the chapter was divided into three parts. The first presents a synthesis of some moments in Behe's argument in

<sup>5</sup> In Chapter 9 of this book, I developed in more detail the reasons why the scientific community maintains that the so-called intelligent design is in reality a more sophisticated form of creationism.

<sup>6</sup> Reginaldo Prandi, 'Perto da Magia, Longe da Política: Derivações do Encantamento no Mundo Desencantado', in *A Realidade Social das Religiões no Brasil*, ed. Antônio F. Pierucci and Reginaldo Prandi (São Paulo: Hucitec, 1996).

*Darwin's Black Box*, seeking to illuminate the author's conceptual standpoint. Next, the concept of *anthropomorphization* will be presented and discussed; in my judgment indispensable for perceiving the conceptual displacements operated by creationist discourse. Finally, the third and last part discusses some characteristics of the contemporary world constituting the background for this strengthening of a more sophisticated version of creationism known as intelligent design, a phenomenon unthinkable in the mid-twentieth century.

### “I DO NOT GIVE MY CHILDREN THE BEST TOYS BECAUSE I DON'T WANT TO SPOIL THEM”

Released in 1996 in the United States, the author of *Darwin's Black Box* is Michael Behe, a biochemist who claims that new discoveries in his discipline undermine Darwin's theory of evolution. In my judgment, the reach of its main theses was not properly perceived when first released. The chemist Robert Shapiro and the philosopher Peter van Inwagen—each with respectable careers in their fields—wrote favorable commentaries on the back cover of the book. Additionally, The Free Press, the book's publisher, was emphatic in its presentation text in the inside back flap: “Michael Behe is not a creationist. He believes in the scientific method, and he does not look to religious dogma for answers to these questions.” In this chapter, I will try to show that, on the contrary, Behe *is* a creationist and his argument is based on religious dogma.

The aforementioned favorable commentaries on Behe's book<sup>7</sup> are noteworthy in light of the fact that the life sciences field in the United States is mostly influenced by various strands of Darwinism. To confirm this, we need only examine the works of Michael Ghiselin, Jerry Coyne, or of the archrivals Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould (who passed away in 2002), but that strictly speaking share some common

<sup>7</sup> It must be said, however, that even in this first moment of reception of Behe's book, serious researchers indicated his grave errors. This was the case, for instance, of the careful reviews of the book published by Kenneth Miller and H. Allen Orr. Cf. Kenneth Miller, ‘Darwin's Black Box, Reviewed by Kenneth Miller’, *Creation/Evolution* 16 (1996): 36–40; H. Allen Orr, ‘Darwin v. Intelligent Design (Again)’, *Boston Review* 22, no. 6 (December 1996), <https://web.archive.org/web/20070630185235/http://bostonreview.net/BR21.6/orr.html>.

evolutionary theoretical foundations.<sup>8</sup> Indeed Darwin's hypotheses are sometimes extrapolated to other fields of knowledge, such as the social sciences, where the discipline of sociobiology tries to explain phenomena in complex societies based on biological determinations.<sup>9</sup>

The fact is that *Darwin's Black Box* found its public outside the traditional niche of readers with a religious background. It was published in Brazil in 1997, shortly after its American launching, which is unusual considering the relatively small number of books in the life sciences in Brazil. The most widely circulated Brazilian newspaper, *Folha de São Paulo*, has a regular science column that published a positive review of the book, praising the "theory of design proposed by the author."<sup>10</sup>

My objective is to elucidate the epistemological standpoint from which Behe makes his criticism of Darwin, based on a perspective informed by philosophy and the social sciences (the field where I conduct my own research). This means, above all, to apprehend the presence of a religious outlook from within an argument that presents itself as purely scientific. Thus, it is Behe's own text that will provide us with observable evidence of the extrapolation that, apparently in the name of biochemistry, launches the discussion into an orbit very different from that announced at the beginning of the work.

Within this objective, it should be clarified that the first eight of eleven chapters in Behe's book are dedicated to a critique of various aspects of Darwinism. In brief, he begins by addressing issues related to an alleged lack of fossil proof of various steps of the evolutionary process affirmed by Darwin. Behe cites some paleontologists who state that "Assiduous collecting up cliff faces yields zigzags, minor oscillations, [...], at a rate too slow to account for all the prodigious change that has occurred in

<sup>8</sup> Cf.: Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); Stephen Jay Gould, 'The Evolutionary Definition of Selective Agency, Validation of the Theory of Hierarchical Selection, and Fallacy of the Selfish Gene', in *Thinking About Evolution: Historical, Philosophical, and Political Perspectives*, ed. Rama S. Singh et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 208–34.

<sup>9</sup> A well-grounded criticism of the reductionism of sociobiology can be found in: Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon Kamin, *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology and Human Nature* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Mauricio Tuffani, 'Darwinismo Radical', *Folha de São Paulo*, 13 December 1998, Caderno Mais!

evolutionary history.”<sup>11</sup> The critique goes on to claim that, for some mathematicians, “Darwinism’s numbers just do not add up,” considering that the period of time necessary for the formation of random and successive mutations of certain more complex organs, such as the eye (a favorite example of the creationists), would be mathematically greater than the currently accepted dating of the origin of such organs.

Having registered these initial dissatisfactions, the author reaches the point to be developed more extensively in his argument: the affirmation of the existence, at the cellular level, of very complex structures composed of “enzymes, other proteins, and nucleic acids”<sup>12</sup> that would have been disregarded by Darwin due to the conceptual and historical limits of nineteenth-century science. Saying that when the author of *On the Origin of Species* produced his theory, the internal structure of the cell (its “black box”) was still unknown, Behe emphasizes that twentieth-century biochemistry invalidates previous assumptions of that structure’s simplicity: “At the tiniest levels of biology—the chemical life of the cell—we have discovered a complex world that radically changes the grounds on which Darwinian debates must be contested.”<sup>13</sup>

The central core of Behe’s argument is precisely this affirmation that biochemistry presents us with complex machines with synchronous and integrated functional performance. Anyone properly informed of the underlying biochemical processes responsible for vision, cellular transport or coagulation, Behe tells us, must surrender to the evidence that the structuring of these functions follows an efficient plan: “If a system requires several closely matched parts to function then it is irreducibly complex, and we can conclude that it was produced as an integrated unit.”<sup>14</sup> Behe intertwines here another recurring objection to the English naturalist: Darwin would have assumed that natural selection operates on already constituted structures, leaving out the issue of the origin of such structures.

For readers with a background in philosophy, a question will inevitably arise in the reading of Behe’s book. Criticism of established knowledge

<sup>11</sup> Niles Eldredge apud Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box*, 27. But it must be said that Eldredge is a well-known Darwinist.

<sup>12</sup> Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 47.

is seen as an end in itself only in the currents of thinking that defend skepticism as a posture toward knowledge of reality. However, as we will see, Behe is very far from being a skeptic. This generates the question: what is he proposing as an alternative to Darwinism? In a scientific debate, beyond criticism of a certain position, sooner or later the positive moment of the argument will arise, when an author, after having expressed dissatisfaction with a given theory, presents his own conception. In the case of *Darwin's Black Box* this takes a long time: the chapters critical of Darwinism are the most numerous and the longest in the book. Nevertheless, the underlying position that informs his criticism of Darwinism becomes clearer starting with Chapter 9 (entitled "Intelligent Design").

The very choice of the expression *intelligent design* provides us with the surest key to unlocking Behe's conceptual matrix. What is this design? Behe responds that "Design is simply the *purposeful arrangement of parts*."<sup>15</sup> And, further on, "design is evident when a number of separate, interacting components are ordered in such a way as to accomplish a function beyond the individual components."<sup>16</sup>

Yet those who speak of intelligent design must at some time face the question of the existence of a *subject* responsible for it. Indeed, planning is not a spontaneous process, as it requires the existence of a subject endowed with will and the ability to plan, a capacity that is manifested precisely in the work that is executed. This postulation of an effective subject of design, at first only tacitly expressed between the lines of *Darwin's Black Box*, is gradually made explicit as the text unfolds: "the straightforward conclusion is that many biochemical systems were designed. [...] The designer knew what the systems would look like when they were completed, then took steps to bring the systems about."<sup>17</sup>

Particularly illuminating in this regard are those passages in which Behe debates with authors who object that if intelligent design in fact existed, the significant failures witnessed in the world—manifest in the biological order of species and in the social and political field of the human species—would not occur. In response, Behe declares that the designer may have many motives that we, planned beings, are simply unaware of. Let's see

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 193.



how he responds to those who emphasize the existence of imperfections in species:

Another problem with the argument from imperfection is that it critically depends on a psychoanalysis of the unidentified designer. Yet the reasons that a designer would or would not do anything are virtually impossible to know unless the designer tells you specifically what those reasons are.<sup>18</sup>

This move is essential. Here, we have the old creationist argument demanding its rights. Behe claims that the designer, or, more bluntly, God, has reasons that are not within our power to understand. It may even be that the existence of supposed imperfections serves as an occasion and catalyst for the progress of humanity, an old theme found in several religious traditions. This is what Behe himself maintains when, by way of illustration, he compares the designer's position with his own as a father:

I do not give my children the best, fanciest toys because I don't want to spoil them, and because I want them to learn the value of a dollar. The argument from imperfection overlooks the possibility that the designer might have multiple motives [...].<sup>19</sup>

The comparison of the designer with a father is extremely instructive about the author's standpoint. For centuries, the Judeo-Christian tradition presented God as an omniscient father who educates his children through successive trials so that they can finally grow up and reach maturity. God's reasons are unknowable, but we should trust that, in the end, he acts for our good.

It is now possible to better understand why *Darwin's Black Box* so often criticizes what it alleges to be Darwinism's oversight on the question of origins. From Behe's perspective, the origin of life is due to the creation of an intelligent designer. With this, the author supposes to resolve the fundamental problem of the genesis of a structure. In truth, this is only a displacement: he attributes to a designer the origin of that for which science, in its current stage of development, can only present plausible

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 223.

hypotheses. In the space left open by criticism of Darwin, the omniscient Judeo-Christian God reappears, putting an end to the possibility of further investigation.

The reasons Behe offers for exchanging Darwin's concepts for the acceptance of an intelligent designer are based on an argument that invokes the popularity of a belief as sufficient reason for its acceptance:

Polls show that more than 90 percent of Americans believe in God, and that about half attend religious services regularly. [...] With all of this public affirmation, why should science find it difficult to accept a theory that supports what most people believe anyway?<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the theory of intelligent design—and we now see that it does not even deserve to be qualified as a theory—is validated not with proof through experimentation supported by an internal coherence of its concepts, but rather because it is accepted by a large number of people. And what can be said of an author who presents as a substantive argument for an idea the fact that “most people believe” in it?

Even defenders of Darwin are aware that his theory has vulnerable points. But it is important here to differentiate two distinct procedures considering their vulnerabilities. The first consists in absorbing the most essential core of Darwinist thought. This consists, in my view, in a very decisive affirmation of the *historicity of being*, demonstrating that what is presented to us as a finished result has in fact a long history of successive transformations (through the fundamental mechanism of natural selection). This core can be separated from those aspects that may have been questioned by later research. For example, it can be recalled that in 1972 the theory of punctuated equilibrium presented by Eldredge and Gould questioned the Darwinian thesis about the gradual and continuous character of the evolution of species.<sup>21</sup> But this fact did not prevent the two authors from continuing to affirm the extreme relevance of Darwin's main theses.

Quite different is a procedure that decrees the complete failure of Darwinism in light of its controversial points, proposing in its place a

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>21</sup> Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould, ‘Punctuated Equilibria: An Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism’, in *Models in Paleobiology*, ed. T. J. M. Schopf (San Francisco: Freeman Cooper, 1972), 82–115.

revamped version of the biblical account from Genesis. This is precisely what Behe does when he states that the “designer,” or more explicitly, God, has his unfathomable reasons and it is not up to us mortals to question his designs. This is nothing other than the creationist concept, now invoking concepts of biochemistry as a poorly applied guise to justify an old idea. The result of this ideological operation is that we, human beings, are no longer presented as the result of a slow phylogenetic becoming that had unpredictable moments in its course, but as the supreme product of an intelligent design, which can be attested to even in cellular complexity.

Behe’s position about what should be done with the conceptual body of Darwinism is presented in Chapter 8 of his book, entitled “Publish or Perish.” It proposes nothing less than the banishment of Darwinism from intellectual circles: “If a theory claims to be able to explain some phenomenon but does not generate even an attempt at an explanation, then it should be banished.” And further on, “the theory of Darwinian molecular evolution has not published, and so it should perish.”<sup>22</sup>

We now have the elements needed to examine a philosophical category that allows us to see with greater clarity the epistemic location of the defenders of intelligent design (who found in Behe one of their most articulate exponents). This is the concept of *anthropomorphization*, which will be explained from now on. At first glance an analysis of this concept may seem far from the topic in focus here. It is, however, indispensable for understanding the philosophical premises under discussion.

## GIVING HUMAN FORM TO WHAT IS NOT KNOWN

It is possible to go back many centuries in the history of philosophy to locate those thinkers who contribute to a better understanding of what is anthropomorphization. Without claiming to be exhaustive, due credit must be given to Spinoza, who at various moments in his work showed how we often attribute a human form to what we do not know. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza comments on our tendency to suppose that nature acts with a purpose, as we do in everyday life. For this reason, the text

<sup>22</sup> Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box*, 186.

continues, men "consider all natural things as means to their own advantage."<sup>23</sup> The next step in this self-referencing procedure is to attribute a human form to the supposed beings who create useful things for our satisfaction: "And since they had never heard anything about the temperament of these rulers, they had to judge it from their own."<sup>24</sup> Instead of apprehending nature in its alterity (its difference from human beings), it comes to be populated by imaginary beings that act to obtain certain ends.

Almost two centuries later, Marx returned to this theme. In 1843, in the first pages of the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law—Introduction*, he highlighted some advances made by the critique of religion, which in Germany had found a prominent representative in Ludwig Feuerbach. In this text, it can be read that "Man, who looked for a superhuman being in the fantastic reality of heaven [...] found nothing there but the reflection of himself."<sup>25</sup> Here again we find the description of the anthropomorphic procedure: the superman that religious thinking affirms to exist is actually the magnified projection of human characteristics. The final result of this projection will be the affirmation of a God who dwells in the heavens and govern human life in an imaginary way. This text impressed its readers by formulating religion as "the *opium* of the people," undoubtedly a strong image pointing to anaesthetization in the face of a hostile reality.<sup>26</sup> Less commented, however, is reference to "the spirit of spiritless conditions"<sup>27</sup> (*der Geist geistloser Zustände*), a metaphor that, in my view, is particularly clear when designating the articulation between religion and the real world devoid of meaning.

Marx also maintains that man is not an abstract being, in fact "Man is the world of man, the state, society." Such qualifications are decisive.

<sup>23</sup> Baruch Spinoza, 'Ethics', in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) I, Appendix, 440.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

<sup>25</sup> Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law', in *MECW*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 175.

<sup>26</sup> Marx was certainly not the first to associate religion to an opiate. Among the scholars who have traced the antecedents of this association, Michael Löwy points to the texts of Heinrich Heine, Moses Hess and Ludwig Feuerbach. Cf. Michael Löwy, 'Marxismo e Religião: Ópio Do Povo?', in *A Teoria Marxista Hoje. Problemas e Perspectivas*, ed. Atilio Boron, Javier Amadeo, and Sabrina Gonzalez (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2007), 299–300.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law', 175.

They lead Marx to distance himself from an atemporal concept of human essence, directing his analysis to those characteristics of the earthly world responsible for everyday anthropomorphic projections: the “criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth.”<sup>28</sup> Not by chance, the *Introduction* then goes on to analyze—even within the conceptual limits of the young Marx—the different classes and class fractions in Germany at the time.

In the twentieth century, Lukács developed Marx’s indications on the topic of anthropomorphization, in his great *Ontology*, written at the end of his life. In addressing the origin of anthropomorphization, the Hungarian philosopher emphasized the importance of *lack of knowledge* of the world the human species inhabits: “daily praxis is always surrounded by the broad circle of the unknowable, impossible to be totally controlled.”<sup>29</sup> The surprising alternation of natural phenomena, so often threatening to humans; the changing and inexorable aging of our bodies; the death of those beings closest to us: these are some of the concerns forcefully presented to the humans cast into an often hostile world. Given the lack of knowledge in which we are immersed, we try to formulate answers to what we experience as disturbing, in part to manage the practical tasks that life in society continually demands.

Lukács understands that the daily experience of human labor is one of the analogous supports upon which anthropomorphic projection operates. In its most simple structure, human labor is the setting of an end to which the concrete activity that endeavors its attainment is oriented. This structure undoubtedly appears metamorphosed in different accounts of the creation of the world, as elaborated by so many cultures. In various cosmogonies, the origin of the world is often presented as a peculiar process of labor, a planned process of fabrication (and I emphasize here *planned*), where a laboring God creates form where before there was only indeterminacy. At the end of his creation, like the human subject who works, he grants himself a day of rest:

It is also not difficult to recognize the human model of labor in other creation myths, even if they have acquired an apparently philosophical

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>29</sup> György Lukács, *Para Uma Ontologia do Ser Social*, vol. 2 (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2013), 658.

form; let's recall once again the world as a clock mechanism placed in motion by God.<sup>30</sup>

Anthropomorphic thinking thus operates an inversion: instead of men and women recognizing themselves as creators of a religious entity, they come to declare themselves created by it. There is also a recurrence of a dual world's structure in the religious perspective: not satisfied with the existing world, it is duplicated in another, transcendent world inhabited by the beings that allegedly created us. Throughout human history, however, the weaknesses of the anthropomorphic reflection become evident. From the artisan God of antiquity (represented in Plato's *Timaeus*), to the watchmaker God of the early modern era, to the contemporary intelligent designer, what we have here are human representations that try to cover what is still partially unknown. It is worth noting that even religious authors who set themselves the task of studying the "history of God" ended up providing the elements to understand that they were actually studying the history of humanity itself.<sup>31</sup> Whence the conclusion that the true home of God is in fact the mind of human beings, incessantly projecting to the exterior this being of imagination. But this projection ultimately depends on the objective conditions prevailing at each historical moment (as we will see in the final part of this chapter).

Taking a path decidedly different from that of Marx and Lukács, the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, will also draw attention to the state of helplessness (*Hilflosigkeit*) in which man finds himself before nature. Faced with this helplessness, Freud maintained that a comforting "humanization of nature"<sup>32</sup> is operated, a process that tries to deal with the anxiety in which the human species finds itself in confronting an unknown universe. Such a humanization would have an infantile prototype, constituted by experience and by the memory that the subject has of the initial years of his life, when he depended on its progenitors for everything. Commenting on the origin of the monotheistic God who simultaneously supports and instills fear in his sons, Freud says that this God reiterates ancestral experiences lived with great intensity by human beings:

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>31</sup> This happened with Reza Aslan, a member of the American Academy of Religion. Cf. Reza Aslan, *God: A Human History* (New York: Random House, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Freud, 'The Future of an Illusion', 16.

It had laid open to view the father who had all along been hidden behind every divine figure as its nucleus. [...]. Now that God was a single person, man's relations to him could recover the intimacy and intensity of the child's relation to his father.<sup>33</sup>

It is impossible here not to think of Michael Behe's comparison of the "intelligent designer" with the family father who must educate his children, a comparison that acquires an additional regressive meaning when a Freudian perspective is taken into account. The attempt to differentiate what is characteristic of our species from that which exists without its interference is a task that must be permanently faced in scientific and philosophical reflection. The search to approach unknown phenomena in a conceptual framework that is not overburdened by anthropomorphic references requires indispensable epistemological vigilance. This would be a *deanthropomorphization*, an effort to apprehend the object in its difference, in its alterity from the knowing subject. It is clear that a complete deanthropomorphization is impossible. Since Kant we know that the human perspective, the point of view of the subject, is insuppressible; our approximation to objects is made through subjective categories that determine a peculiar form of grasping the world. Even so, deanthropomorphization is a goal to be pursued—even if never fully reached—a patient effort to rectify the researcher's previous beliefs and a search for a conceptual vocabulary more appropriate to the alterity of what is being studied.

Once familiar with anthropomorphization and the images it projects onto its objects, it is impossible not to recognize its presence in creationist discourse. In the case under analysis, Behe's text is replete with concepts referring to the origin of life from a very determined and unilateral human perspective. "Design," "intelligence," "consciousness," "intentionality," "will," "finality," are all attributes present in the human species, but which creationism supposes to have organized life since its non-human origins. As I demonstrated in previous chapters of this book, it is characteristic of the religious imaginary to project teleological characteristics found in some sectors of human experience to the cosmos as a whole. The (teleological) designer Behe refers to is just another example of an anthropomorphic figure who claims to be scientific. For if we can see beyond the technical moments of Behe's argument in his incursions into

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 19.

biochemistry and focus on the underlying conceptual matrix, it is possible to identify an ancient religious theory about the origin of life that adopts an extremely dated conceptual perspective.

Finally, it would be worth discussing why, at a given historical moment, interpretations that refer to Divine Providence gain space and manage to present themselves in the media as scientific. This discussion necessarily leads us out of the realm of theoretical debate and into mundane reality. Inflows from historical reality offer the opportunity for the arising of certain interpretations: science and religion are practiced daily in our prosaic world. The final section of this chapter will thematize this world. Only with this thematization does it become possible to understand why the old form of mystical approach to phenomena has returned with such popularity in recent years, even among some more learned segments of the population.

## BACK TO THE EARTHLY WORLD

When able to undo the inversion produced by anthropomorphic thinking, an access route is opened that allows a more precise view of what appears as if transfigured by religious discourse. In examining the current mundane context, attention is drawn to its acute state of fragmentation. If we accompany the broad synthesis that several respected economists present about what is conventionally known as globalization, we see that this process—nowhere near as recent as it is usually presented—came with a brutal fragmentation of the social relations. With the end of the era of the so-called welfare state (which, strictly speaking, was present in only a very limited number of nations), a progressive deterioration of the living conditions for broad sectors of the world's population has occurred.

Even the annual reports produced by an institution as conventional as the United Nations, hardly a suspect for fostering destabilizing sympathies, attest to this deterioration. In one of his lectures in 2020, the U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres stated that "Inequality defines our time." According to the speech's transcript found on the U.N. website:

High levels of inequality are associated with economic instability, corruption, financial crises, increased crime and poor physical and mental health. [...] Between 1980 and 2016, the world's richest 1 per cent captured 27



per cent of the total cumulative growth in income. [...] Deep disparities begin before birth and define lives – and early deaths [...].<sup>34</sup>

More recently, in early 2022, Oxfam (the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief), a non-governmental organization based in Oxford, England, also released its report on the concentration of global wealth. Among other data, the text examines the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on a world that has long been fragmented by inequality, stating that “inequality of income is a stronger indicator of whether you will die from COVID-19 than age.”<sup>35</sup> The report goes on to recall something that is not new to anyone who studies the topic of rural and urban expropriations and wealth concentration: “Widening economic, gender, and racial inequalities – as well as the inequality that exists between countries – are tearing our world apart.”<sup>36</sup>

In this international context, the position of the United States—the country of origin and diffusion of creationism and intelligent design—must be analyzed with caution. On the one hand, the strength of the United States economy is well known. It has the world’s highest GDP, high per capita income, and the power to influence the direction of the global economy. But these aggregate economic indicators mask an extremely heterogeneous domestic reality. As portrayals of this heterogeneity, it can be mentioned two documentaries that depict the harsh living conditions for workers in the United States. *Down and Out in America*, directed by Lee Grant, won the Oscar for best documentary in 1986. The film depicted the severe impoverishment of workers provoked by the Reagan administration’s economic policies in the 1980s. Released years later, the 2012 documentary *A Place at the Table*, directed by Lori Silverbush and Kristi Jacobson, received the 2013 *Pare Lorentz Award*. The film’s release was accompanied by the book *A Place at the Table: The*

<sup>34</sup> UN Secretary-General, ‘Secretary-General’s Nelson Mandela Lecture: “Tackling the Inequality Pandemic: A New Social Contract for a New Era” [as Delivered]’, 18 July 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-07-18/secretary-generals-nelson-mandela-lecture-%E2%80%99Tackling-the-inequality-pandemic-new-social-contract-for-new-era%E2%80%9D-delivered>.

<sup>35</sup> Oxfam, ‘Inequality Kills: The Unparalleled Action Needed to Combat Unprecedented Inequality in the Wake of COVID-19’, 17 January 2022, 8, <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621341/bp-inequality-kills-170122-en.pdf;jsessionid=EB1ECD3096EEAB39B71BE9ACA05A6415?sequence=9>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 2.

*Crisis of 49 Million Hungry Americans and How to Solve It.*<sup>37</sup> In contrast to the common understanding that hunger is only a problem in peripheral nations (or among immigrants who live in the United States), the film and book document the plight of millions of US citizens who do not have the resources to meet their basic needs.

It is quite evident that American workers began to face more serious problems in their living conditions much earlier than the last third of the twentieth century. In addition to the obvious example of the great crisis of 1929, it should be emphasized that even in economic cycles of greater prosperity the nation's distribution of wealth has always been extremely unequal. The myth of an equal opportunity society, enabling countless processes of social ascension, has in fact only been a reality for a minority of the population. Social climbers—individuals who ascend the societal structure—traditionally have their life stories publicized and amplified in the mainstream media, constantly renewing the myth. However, for every climber, a legion of dispossessed remain in obscurity. This situation combines with tremendous professional competition, taking the values of individualism to an extreme, a phenomenon amply documented in the nation's cultural production in films, videos and novels for instance.

The signs of discontents in American culture are more than evident. A whole chapter could be dedicated to the "freedom" to acquire firearms in the country, which persists thanks to a powerful arms industry lobby, most strongly represented by the National Rifle Association (NRA). The ease of access to arms allows individuals to unleash their aggression in apparently unmotivated massacres, constituting part of a routine of violence that affects even the school environment.

The social scientist Christopher Lasch coined a very apt expression in 1984 to designate the new individualities that are formed in this markedly hostile reality: they are constitutive of *The Minimal Self*.<sup>38</sup> This expression designates an individuality that relinquishes an expansive way of life and affirmative approach to existence. Facing a very violent reality, there is instead a withdrawal to a defensive core. Its main value comes to be "survivalism,"<sup>39</sup> in Lasch's words, a posture that sees pure and simple

<sup>37</sup> Participant Media, *A Place at the Table: The Crisis of 49 Million Hungry Americans and How to Solve It* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 60–98.

survival as the maximum reference for life, ignoring any more substantive quality in that which survives. Instead of the heroic style that characterized previous historical moments (portrayed in literature in characters that had the expectation of “a world to gain”), since the last decades of the twentieth century we see the rise of a predominantly withdrawn and frightened subjectivity that seeks to protect itself at all times from that which threatens it, whether real or imaginary.

Lasch’s considerations about the minimal self bring to mind a study conducted, independently, by the psychoanalyst Piera Aulagnier on characteristics of the *ego ideal*. The ego ideal is a psychic dimension detected by Freud that is responsible for offering the self opportunities to develop one’s own life trajectory, which is not “a simple desire to return to the past.”<sup>40</sup> Through the ego ideal, each subject can visualize himself within a temporality and libidinally invest in the development of his personality. This anticipation of the future is part of the normal functioning of any psyche: “*To invest in ideals implies that we can recognize the right to a future.*”<sup>41</sup> As far as I know, a dialogue between Aulagnier’s and Lasch’s considerations about the minimal Self has never taken place. But this does not prevent us from making this connection. At this moment in history, the challenges to realizing the ego ideal are noteworthy: the hostility of the current reality confines and restricts the possible futures of each subject. Needless to say, this restriction more severely affects the most disadvantaged classes, hit hard by the brutality of capitalist accumulation. Everything goes as if the current moment had acquired the characteristics of an extremely compact present, marked by defensive affects, impeding the creation of long-term projects. Further on, we will see that this restrictive reality is the locus where a wide range of religious discourses proliferates, discourses that endeavor to provide support to their faithful as they deal with an intimidating daily life.

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Taking an international perspective, it is crucial to mention the crisis of an alternative political project, understood in the broadest sense of the term as a life project for relations among humans in society. This crisis accentuates the narrowness of the prevailing reality in our current moment.

<sup>40</sup> Piera Aulagnier, *Os Destinos do Prazer* (Rio de Janeiro: Imago Editora, 1985), 22.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 31, my emphasis.

The opposition between conflicting social and political paradigms during the twentieth century is fundamental for understanding contemporary history in structural terms.<sup>42</sup> Regardless of the position one takes, the intense conflict that for decades opposed capitalist societies to the socialist political project is the background not only of the internal policy of various countries but also of the international relations during most of the century. The growth of socialist parties (as well as active social movements) provided the backdrop for the emergence of States that opposed the prevailing capitalist system.

Acknowledging this fact does not at all mean closing one's eyes to the serious distortions that have occurred in the countries of so-called real socialism, nor does it assume that these countries realized the objectives of the socialist ideal as formulated in the nineteenth century. It only means discerning that the presence of a significant group of states that proclaimed themselves to be socialist, together with the possibility of social transformations occurring in other countries, constituted a background upon which various conflicts took place in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, this counterweight no longer has the power to radiate transformative ideas and projects (which made it an active catalyst during much of the twentieth century). This is not the proper place to debate how to precisely qualify Chinese society, where a self-proclaimed socialist government has historically made significant gains in its social indicators. But even analysts favorable to some aspects of the Chinese experience call attention to the country's progressive assimilation to capitalist practices of concentration of capital and competition among workers.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, Cuban society has provided successful examples in terms of vaccinating its population during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the words of the British newspaper, *The Guardian*: "This down-trodden island struggles to keep the lights on, but has now vaccinated more of its citizens against COVID-19 than any of the world's major

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Tom Bottomore, *Theories of Modern Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2010), 49–57.

<sup>43</sup> Renildo Souza, *Estado e Capital na China* (Salvador: EDUFBA, 2018), 251–53. A perspective more favorable to the Chinese experience can be found in the analysis of Domenico Losurdo in his book *Fuga da História? A Revolução Russa e a Revolução Chinesa Vistas de Hoje* (Rio de Janeiro: Revan, 2004).

nations.”<sup>44</sup> Recognizing the importance of conquests such as these, the fact remains that living conditions in Cuba are too adverse for the island to be considered a focus of international diffusion of a socialist ideal.

Considering this global panorama, and in light of the crisis of the political project that consistently criticizes capitalist society, the prevailing media narrative has declared that the latter is the only option.<sup>45</sup> The rest of this story is well known: practices of extreme competition between individuals and social classes becomes the predominant reality, and this is true for nearly the entire planet. There are many forms of reaction to the ultracompetitive and unequal world, generating different subjective positions. In addition to the aforementioned minimal Self (a subjectivity that revolves around the defensive orbit of its private interests), other reactions are certainly possible. Without claiming to be exhaustive, they range from pure and simple hedonism, electing consumption as the supreme value (but this possibility only exists for those who objectively have resources to consume...), to groups that express their discontents with reality through practices of violence against other groups, viewed as those responsible for their misfortune.<sup>46</sup> Not to mention the unprecedented expansion of drug production and consumption, driving an international trade so powerful that it generates disruptive effects on nation states. Not by accident, drug consumption is characterized by an alteration of the sensorial apparatus of the user for a period of time; it is as if the relationship with reality (which provokes displeasure) is placed in suspense for a certain time.

The reaction I sought to analyze more closely can be understood in this context: the widespread growth of a transcendent discourse that refers to supernatural beings and processes as a condition for understanding the earthly world. Notwithstanding the diversity of religious manifestations, it is necessary to discern the presence of at least one common denominator: the recurrence of the assumption that the characteristics of a manipulated

<sup>44</sup> Ed Agustín, ‘Cuba’s Vaccine Success Story Sails Past Mark Set by Rich World’s Covid Efforts’, *The Guardian*, 5 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/05/cuba-coronavirus-covid-vaccines-success-story>.

<sup>45</sup> This same media widely promotes the expression “crisis of socialism” but is highly unlikely to call the gravity of the current global situation a crisis of capitalism.

<sup>46</sup> Even historians far from Marxism recognize that the same social reality is responsible for apparently contradictory responses, ranging from the formation of religious sects to violent gangs. This is the argument that William McNeill makes in his ‘A História da Violência Urbana’, in *Insegurança Pública*, ed. Nilson V. Oliveira (São Paulo: Nova Alexandria, 2002), 20–23.

society are necessary moments for the improvement of humanity. When we examine some texts produced by leaders of religious movements, we see that they declare that if we are suffering terribly now, if our life today is so difficult, there is a greater reason for this: these are the necessary trials that we must endure so that we may evolve, in accordance with the more general architecture of the cosmos.<sup>47</sup>

We see repeatedly in the declarations of religious practitioners the affirmation that it is only through their churches that one can find solidarity and attention to the problems that afflict them.<sup>48</sup> Hence the emphasis on "belonging to a group," the yearning to be part of a collective, a feeling that is extremely undermined and eroded in the broader civil society. But religious demand differs according to the social class of the faithful: while in the more disadvantaged classes the preaching of religious leaders refers directly to material needs (promising a better life through obtaining a job, or the restoration of the family), in the wealthier classes the content of religious demand is quite different.

In the first case, the link between the search for religion and the situation of dispossession is very clear: surveys of followers dedicated to a religious practice reveal that they are under pressure from very adverse material circumstances. In the case of the higher classes, who have their basic needs satisfied and are also dedicated to practices of sophisticated consumption, the link between religious need and the social context may not be as immediate, but further investigation clearly demonstrates it. The questions that this group presents are said to be more "spiritual," linked to themes such as the meaning of life and its path in mundane existence.<sup>49</sup> If in the immanence of this world this meaning is hampered

<sup>47</sup> Cf. the best seller of Brian Weiss, *Many Lives, Many Masters: The True Story of a Prominent Psychiatrist, His Young Patient, and the Past-Life Therapy That Changed Both Their Lives* (New York: Touchstone, 1988). The assumption that past lives exist for a single individual, as there are future lives that await, is an integral part of this religious worldview.

<sup>48</sup> Regina Novaes, 'Crenças Religiosas e Convicções Políticas', in *Política e Cultura: Século XXI*, ed. Luis Carlos Fridman (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2002), 78–81.

<sup>49</sup> The books of Pierre Weil, a psychologist with religious influence, are characteristic examples of this search for a meaning in life at the heart of the more intellectualized groups. It is worth mentioning that Weil's books are published even by UNESCO. Cf. Pierre Weil, *The Art of Living in Peace: Towards a New Peace Consciousness* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1990).

by all kinds of impediments, what is lacking here can be realized through the transcendence of another world.

As for the place occupied by science in this process, the prediction found in the scientific and philosophical discourse of the first third of the twentieth century (or even long before, as in the case of Goethe) has clearly not been fulfilled. And it was not only Freud who assessed that a progressive weakening of religion was under way. Only a decade earlier we find the claim of an unequivocal disenchantment of the world in the writings of Max Weber, a concept that refers to a progressive loss of space for magic religious experience in the name of scientific rationality. In his words:

Nor is it a matter of chance that today it is only in the smallest groups, between individual human beings, pianissimo, that you find the pulsing beat that in bygone days heralded the prophetic spirit that swept through great communities like a firestorm and welded them together.<sup>50</sup>

But Weber's predictions of a gradual weakening of religious demand have also not been confirmed by recent history. It is more than evident that the enormous scientific development in the contemporary world (capable of carrying human beings in spaceships beyond the planet and of interlinking them in a virtual computer network), did not prevent its sharp contradictions from maintaining favorable conditions for the search for transcendence.

The adherence of scientists to a religious perspective indicates that the sublimation function performed by engagement with knowledge—a mechanism Freud highlighted—is no longer sufficient for the practitioners of science. Sublimation should be understood here in the non-evaluative meaning of the term, in the sense of a displacement of desire that presents its own productivity. For the group of religious intellectuals studied here, a supplementary reinforcement of their beliefs is needed to give meaning to their scientific activity. The promise of human emancipation traditionally sustained by science has revealed its weakness in the face of the flagrant degradation of living conditions of vast contingents of the world population, as well as the increasingly evident environmental crisis. With the difficulties confronting an alternative political project, religious

<sup>50</sup> Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 30.

discourse has occupied this space, presenting the contradictions found in social life as necessary moments in the evolution of humanity. Thus, it is possible to find in social sciences texts, mainly since the 1970s, the aforementioned references to a re-enchantment of the world, designating the very intense return of a transcendent perspective reputed to have been near extinction by authors at the beginning of the twentieth century.

For sure, it cannot be said that the strengthening of religious discourse is a particularly United States phenomenon (even recognizing that Christian fundamentalisms have a long history in the country). In France, a country with a strong tradition of secular thought dating back to Enlightenment polemics aimed at religious institutions, the promise of transcendence has expanded in various sectors of the culture. Brazilian academics who supposed that the writer Paulo Coelho—the international bestselling author of the *The Alchemist*<sup>51</sup>—was merely a Brazilian phenomenon were mistaken. In addition to selling very well in France and practically all over the world, Coelho was honored with the *Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur*, clearly demonstrating that his mystical books answer to similar demands found in European culture.

Finally, at least since 2019 there is a “*Zentrum für Biokomplexität & NaturTeleologie*” (Center for BioComplexity & Natural Teleology) in Austria that promotes through its website activities dedicated to intelligent design.<sup>52</sup> One of the supporters of this Center is the already mentioned Discovery Institute, the traditional US think tank dedicated to promoting the religious values of creationism throughout the world. At the same time, in Latin America, the demand for religious explanations of the world is so intense that in Brazil, for instance, since the last third of the twentieth century new undergraduate programs called Sciences of Religion have proliferated.<sup>53</sup> Although presenting them as distinct from traditional Theology studies, a closer look at the faculty of

<sup>51</sup> Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist* (New York: Harper One, 2014).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. ‘Zentrum Für Biokomplexität & NaturTeleologie’, accessed 11 October 2021, <https://www.biocomplexity.at/>.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Nila Maria, ‘Como é o Curso de Ciências da Religião em 9 Perguntas e Respostas’, Via *Carreira*, 8 November 2021, <https://viacarreira.com/curso-ciencias-da-religiao/>.



some of these programs indicates a high incidence of professionals with religious background.<sup>54</sup>

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It was necessary to take this route through dimensions of human life apparently distant from religion (such as the economy, the dispute between conflicting political projects, cultural production, etc.) to visualize the social context in which the transcendent promise proliferates today. The legacy of great thinkers such as Spinoza, Marx and Darwin is undoubtedly crucial: they provide indispensable categories of analysis for deciphering the phenomenon. But it would be a betrayal of their most profound teachings to believe that the conceptual legacy has ahistorical validity: it needs to be permanently revised in the context of the contemporary world. Only then is it possible to understand why “the spirit of spiritless conditions,” in Marx’s words, found such fertile ground for expansion.

Perhaps this explains the unfulfilled expectations of those thinkers who claimed that scientific development would reduce to a minimum the existence of religious practices. For all that I have sought to make transparent in this book, authors such as Goethe, Freud and Weber obviously could not foresee—nor did they intend to—the more recent developments of the contemporary world. The growing difficulties in sustaining desire projects—including political ones—have created an extremely inhospitable world where, even with “science and art,” massive daily doses of religion must be offered to its citizens.

<sup>54</sup> As a native of a Latin American country, I should note that there are religious movements in the region worthy of respect, such as Liberation Theology. Acting in areas of intense social conflict, priests, friars and laypeople in this movement place their lives at risk to struggle for greater social justice. Some of them are closer to the left than socialist political parties in the region. Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (deceased in 2020) is one of the activists with a valiant history of struggle in defense of the oppressed. Recognizing this work, however, does not invalidate the set of issues discussed here.

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